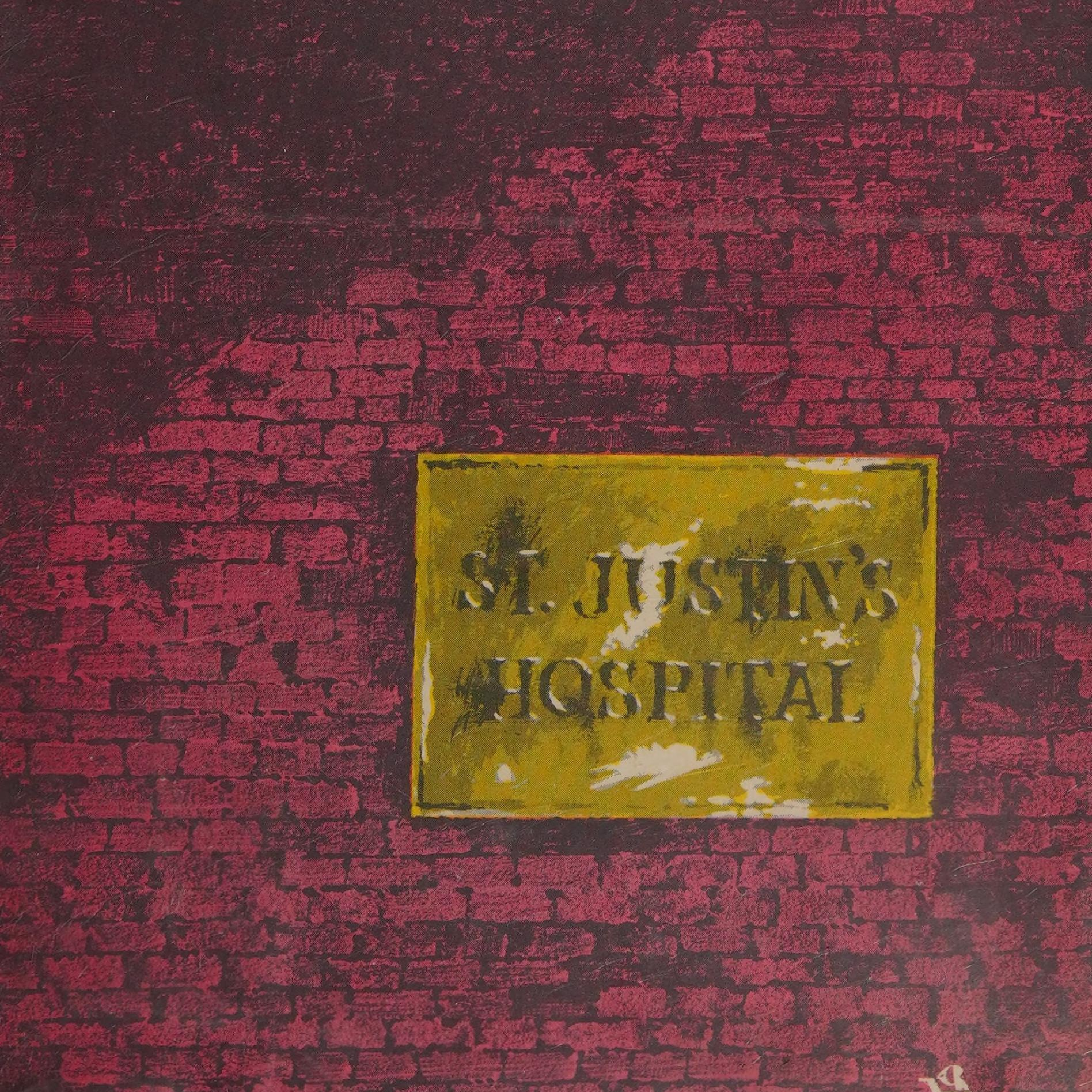
FIONA SINCLAIR

BUT THE PATIENT DIED


ST. JUSTIN'S
HOSPITAL

A CRIME CLUB SELECTION

B.T.P.D.
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BUT THE PATIENT DIED

When Geoffrey Tremaine arrived at famed St. Justin's Hospital to confirm his new appointment as surgical registrar he found Everard Nicholson, the senior administrator, crumpled on the floor of his office in a coma. An emergency operation removed a brain tumor and Mr. Nicholson seemed well on his way to recovery when, suddenly and mysteriously, he died.

Tremaine quickly came to know the intimate and mysterious nature of his new hospital and his new colleagues and discovered that there was a horrible fear hanging over them all—a fear that had been set in motion by the late, and very dead, Mr. Nicholson.

Scene: England

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Scene: *England*

Classic
Puzzler

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Fiona Sinclair

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"Cur'd yesterday of my disease,
I died last night of my physician."

MATTHEW PRIOR, 1664–1721

There is no such hospital as St. Justin's, and all the characters in this tale are no more than figments of my imagination; though I must confess that I've grown quite fond of some of them.

This book is dedicated to my many dear friends among the Medical, Nursing and Ancillary professions without whose skill and devoted care I would not have lived to complete it.

At the risk of attenuating a dedication to the verge of tedium, I would like to thank equally all those behind the scenes, the resourceful Administrators and their staffs, without whom our incomparable British Hospitals would be unable to function for a single day.

BUT THE PATIENT DIED

Chapter One

Letter from Chris Harcourt, surgical registrar at St. Justin's Hospital, to Dr. Geoffrey Tremaine.

Dear Geoff,

It was good to hear from you again and grand news that you've got yourself spliced. I shall look forward very much to meeting Mrs. Tremaine.

About living out round here, yes it's possible enough if you don't mind being a bit squalid . . . you'll need to be close to the hospital to get in on call and Top People don't choose this district. However it's cheap which is a pretty salient point I find—I'll scout round near my digs and let you know if there's anything going.

As for St. Justin's, well it's a respectable address of course. There are things that stick in the gullet . . . but you won't want me to harp on that—it'll be good to have you with us anyway.

They're a decent lot on the neuro-surgical unit; Peter Lamb's our senior registrar, I doubt if you'll have come across him, he's ex-service like me and middle-aged by your standards! He's got a wife and two kids and they live just round the corner from the hospital. The houseman's a likeable innocent. Welsh as they make 'em, Dai Davies is his name; he thinks Medicine's wonderful and we try not to disabuse him!

Alfred Jonson does the anaesthetics for us—he's first *class, though to the uninitiated eye several miles round the bend. As for Sir Charles, well he's not exactly a lovable type, but he's a damn good diagnostician and a superb operator . . . you'll learn plenty. Just where all this knowledge is going to land us is the big topic among us registrars of course—around forty well-qualified men turn up for every consultant post that's advertised! However, hope springs eternal I suppose . . .*

Well I'll look forward to seeing you on the 1st. Tell Mrs. Tremaine I won't forget about your digs.

Yours ever,
Chris.

"No flats to be had?" asked Anne Tremaine as her husband finished reading.

He looked up and for a moment they smiled at each other; breakfast together was still something of a novelty, they'd only been married six weeks.

But Geoff frowned a little as he looked down at the letter again; he handed it over:

"Read it and see what you think," he said.

He gulped down some coffee while she struggled with Chris's calligraphy; he was off to the new job this morning and somehow the letter had made him think nostalgically of his days as a Cornish GP. . . .Was he an ambitious ass to try and specialise?

"I think it's hopeful," Anne's buoyant voice broke in on his thoughts. "After all, living out's what matters now, isn't it? You'll be a registrar for the next three years, we don't need to worry about jobs for ages!"

"Mm," responded Geoff a little doubtfully.

His wife grinned at him. "What's forty to one anyway?" she inquired cheerfully. "I'd be putting my money on you if the odds were a hundred to one!" She stood up and dropped a kiss on his ear. "Let's go into action on JYL," she suggested, and picked up a steaming kettle.

Outside the frost sparkled on the pavement and on JYL's ancient paintwork and battered hood. She was an

M.G. of many years standing, and the Tremaines' new car, embryo specialists being, from the economic point of view, one of the lower forms of life in Modern Britain.

Geoff felt more cheerful as he and Anne threw themselves into the familiar fight to rouse JYL's vital spark. In preparation for today they had evolved a foolproof routine; two Davy lamps and a rug to counteract the chill night hours, two gallons of boiling water as a morning *apéritif*, some judicious tickling of her carburettor, half an hour or so's healthy exercise with the starting handle (accompanied by delicate pressure on the throttle) and all JYL needed after that was a good push on a down gradient. As Anne pointed out, this final conquest of muscle over metal gave one a real sense of achievement at the very beginning of the day.

Geoff turned once as the road took him out of sight and saw Anne still waving gaily among the lamps and kettles on the pavement and then he and JYL were roaring through the frosty morning air towards St. Justin's.

The noise and smell of the big teaching hospital took Geoff Tremaine back with a rush to his student days. But as he filled his lungs with the warm antiseptic-smelling air and heard all round him the rumble and clatter of trolleys, the sigh of lifts, the brisk echo of busy nurses' feet on the polished corridors, his nervousness receded and he felt a sort of lift at being in the centre of things again, as if the huge hospital as well as alarming him, added something to his stature now that he was part of it.

He'd been told to report to Everard Nicholson, St. Justin's senior administrator. As the heavy door of the admin. section clicked to behind him, he became aware that he had entered a startlingly different world. The functional bare floors and the busy roar of the hospital seemed distant and dream-like in this hushed, luxurious place where thick carpets deadened every footfall and the only sound was the well-bred patter of silenced typewriters. The inquiry office was empty and he wandered on down the corridor studying the names written in gilt letters on the frosted glass of closed doors. One of them swung silently inward as he paused to read it and a pair of pale eyes peered at him out of a long narrow head, somewhat inadequately furnished with wispy brown hair.

"Yes?" queried this individual economically.

"Oh—er—Mr. Bennett?" asked Tremaine, glancing at the name on the open door. "I'm Sir Charles Hallet's new surgical registrar. I was told to report to Mr. Nicholson."

As he followed Bennett down the corridor, Geoff surreptitiously straightened his tie and ran a quelling hand over his obstreperous black hair in preparation for the coming interview. His guide led him into an anteroom and signed to him to wait. Tremaine paused obediently and watched Bennett's long narrow figure approach his chief's door with a deferential stoop. If he was a bit livelier he'd look like a ferret, Geoff decided. There seemed to be no answer from inside Nicholson's room and Bennett's pale bony fingers slid down and turned the handle.

"I'm afraid Mr. Nicholson's not——" The thin reedy voice stopped abruptly. For a few seconds he and Geoff stared at a man's body lying huddled on the thick grey carpet inside the room.

Then the junior administrator abruptly shut the door.

"I'm afraid Mr. Nicholson is unable to see you at present," he said.

Geoff blinked. The remark, though just, struck him as something of an understatement.

A short silence followed. At last the thin man turned his pale expressionless eyes on the young registrar and suggested formally:

"Perhaps you can come back later, Mr.—er——"

"Tremaine," supplied Geoff absently. He turned a somewhat puzzled gaze on the ferrety Bennett.

"That was—I mean, Mr. Nicholson is in there, is he?"

"Mr. Nicholson's in his room, but I'm afraid he can't see you at present," the man repeated woodenly.

"No . . . quite." Tremaine hesitated. "He has someone in there with him, I expect?"

The pale eyes flickered. "I've no reason to suppose so."

Geoff frowned in some bewilderment. "He's—quite well, is he?" he asked at last. "You don't think he might be in need of a doctor?"

The ferret had developed a cornered look.

"I should have to consult my colleague about that."

"Oh, I see." Geoff fingered the stethoscope in his pocket and stared speculatively at the closed door behind which lay the body on the carpet. He was wondering if it wasn't incumbent on him as a doctor to disregard this curious obstructionist and march straight in. Even supposing the senior administrative officer was partial to a nine o'clock nap on his carpet, that posture somehow hadn't suggested natural sleep. . . .

With sudden decision he walked to the door and opened it; from the body huddled on the floor came an immense racket of stertorous breathing. There was no one else in the room. Tremaine glanced back at the anteroom behind him, but now that too was empty. Presumably Bennett had vanished to consult his colleague.

Tremaine turned back to the sick man. The huddled, noisy heap looked strangely out of place in this palatial office; there were blurred tracks in the thick pile of the carpet, he noticed, as if the stricken man had dragged himself along before finally succumbing to unconsciousness.

Geoff stared down at him thoughtfully. He was brown-haired and fat and his pallid cheeks had sagged away from the glistening slits of his half-closed eyes. His lips were pale and slack and a shiny ooze of saliva dribbled from one corner, making a darker patch on the dark grey carpet.

Kneeling, the young doctor laid three fingers on the limp, fleshy wrist and timed the slow, full pulse against his watch. He frowned and pulled the slack body gently on to its back; a sound at the door made him look up and he saw a crisp-looking young fellow staring at the limp body with horrified amazement. Behind the newcomer hovered the tall wavering form of Bennett.

"Great Scott!" The new arrival crossed the room rapidly. "What is it, a stroke?" he asked Tremaine.

"Can't say yet," Geoff returned non-committally. He turned back to the sick man, drew out a diamond tiepin, unknotted the tie and released the collar's tight hold on the thick neck. One of the hovering administrators picked the sparkling pin off the carpet and laid it carefully on Everard Nicholson's desk.

The young registrar's hands quickly unbuttoned the dark waistcoat and eased out a white shirt and thick woollen vest, exposing a plump, fair-skinned chest with a mat of curly brown hair. He pulled his stethoscope from his overcoat pocket, clipped in the ear-pieces and listened intently as he moved the tiny microphone over the sick man's chest. At last he stowed it away thoughtfully and looked around for his ophthalmoscope; gently widening one comatose eye he peered through the instrument at the blurred and swollen bulb of Nicholson's optic nerve.

He grunted and rocked back on his heels as he put the instrument away; taking a little round hammer from his pocket he turned to the legs of the unconscious man and tapped gently just below the knee. But though he tried each knee again and again the flaccid limbs refused to respond with their tiny involuntary kick.

He squatted by the sick man's feet and was amused to catch Bennett's disapproving look as he gently eased off the senior administrator's black shoes and socks. He scratched the soles of the bare, waxy feet, but the hairy toes refused to curl downwards. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction and stood up.

"How is he?"

Tremaine blinked thoughtfully at his questioner, and the young man added, "I'm Bates, by the way; Bennett and I are Mr. Nicholson's personal secretaries. I hastened here the instant Bennett told me this terrible news and found you already—er—in action."

Geoff ignored the implied criticism.

"I'm afraid it's a bit early to say how he is," he remarked, and added after a moment, "Do you happen to know whether Sir Charles Hallet is in the hospital today?"

"Oh yes, he will be," Bates replied at once. "Monday is one of Sir Charles's days."

"Well, I think he should see this." Geoff looked round and saw the phone on the big desk. He picked up the receiver and spoke to the hospital switchboard.

"They say he's gone down to X-ray. Can you direct me there?" he asked Bates when he'd put the receiver down.

But finding Sir Charles wasn't so simple. Tremaine walked through the department peering rather diffidently into the various cubicles; he'd seen the surgeon once, during the crowded few minutes when he was interviewed for his job and could only dig up a confused memory of a shortish, heavily built man with a huge head and massive shoulders. . . .

Ah! Surely that must be Sir Charles . . . or was it? He stared anxiously into the cubicle. Suddenly the big head swung round and a pair of bulbous, blue eyes fixed him.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded a grating voice, and poor Geoff remembered rather abruptly that he wasn't young Dr. Tremaine whom everyone knew in Penryth, but an insignificant surgical registrar, and a new boy to boot. To make everything worse he was still sweating and bulky in his overcoat, his stethoscope slung about his neck as though he were a visiting specialist.

"My name's Tremaine, sir," he answered as boldly as he could, "and I'm . . . I'm looking for Sir Charles Hallet."

"I am Hallet."

"Oh, I . . . I thought perhaps you were, sir." Geoff struggled out of the offending overcoat. "The position is . . . well, I'm your new registrar, sir, and——"

The surgeon had swelled alarmingly. "Heavens, man!" he exploded. "What are you eager-beavering about! If you've just arrived you should be seeing Everard Nicholson, not trailing after me."

"No, sir. Quite, sir. But as it happens . . . I—er—I have seen him. That was what I wanted to ask your advice about. . . ."

"Young man," bellowed Sir Charles, his light-blue eyes bulging ominously, "if you have any complaints about the senior administrative officer, you have come to the wrong quarter! Try the Ministry of Health!" He turned a large back on the young man and continued to the radiologist:

"Carry on, Rogers, perhaps my new registrar will be good enough to let us see these X-rays."

Baffled, Geoff watched in silence as the radiologist went over to the tank; for the first time he saw that there was a woman in the room with the two men. Relative of the patient, he thought automatically; he'd seen that stillness of mute fear too often to be mistaken.

There was silence as Alan Rogers's large pale hands disappeared beneath the still black surface of the fluid; they rose again holding two dripping X-ray plates. Carefully avoiding the watching stare of the child's mother, Rogers carried them over to a row of lighted frames and slotted them in so that the light shone through the dark sheets.

A young child's rib-cage appeared, first facing the three men and the woman, and then, in the second plate, in profile.

The radiologist stood quite still, his huge figure towering between the mother and the poignant silhouettes as if to protect her from the message they conveyed. The faint hope that had supported Jean Hallet until now slid away from her. She didn't speak. Her gaze left the fragile bones with their dark shadows, and she watched her husband whose heavy head hung forward on his thick neck as he stared intently at the X-rays of his daughter's chest.

"Riddled with it again!" he said. And Jean looked away. Knowing Charles, she knew he was anxious, but even his anxiety and pity seemed to be tinged with impatience; even, she pushed the thought away, with disgust.

Rogers spoke quickly. "It's virtually confined to the right lung," he said. "I think she should do very well with an artificial pneumothorax. Don't you?" he challenged the father.

Sir Charles glanced at his wife. "Oh yes, Rogers, I quite agree with you. I'll ask Carlton-Smith to do it this afternoon if possible." He stared belligerently at the lighted plates again. "Poor little devil, can't get rid of it, can she? I thought we were over this when I packed her off to boarding school. Why in Heaven should she have T.B.?" He shook his head.

"Well, I'll fix it up and get over to out-patients. I'm late already."

His wife said, "Is she to stay in now then?"

"Of course. No sense in carting her home again if she's going into theatre this afternoon. Take her over to the private wing and fix it up with Sister Craig, you can manage that, can't you?"

He strode out and cannoned into Geoff.

"You again! . . ." Heated by anxiety the surgeon's rage boiled over. The young registrar waited until he could make himself heard.

"Sir. I must apologise for intruding. . . . I'm frightfully sorry, sir, I hadn't realised . . ." He paused while Sir Charles snorted like an impatient bull and then continued hurriedly:

"Unfortunately I had no alternative but to wait, sir. . . . The fact is Mr. Nicholson was in coma when I saw him."

The young man was so relieved at getting out his explanation that for a moment it didn't occur to him that his news was having a curious reception. The surgeon, so energetic a moment before, was abruptly still and quite unnaturally quiet, and behind him in the little room the man and woman seemed frozen where they stood. It was uncanny, as though between one moment and the next the moving camera had stuck and the recording tape gone dead.

At last Sir Charles cleared his throat, "Good God! . . ." he exclaimed. "Have you examined him?"

"Yes, sir. I came to the conclusion . . . that is, I rather thought there might be something intracranial, sir. It could be a stroke, but . . . it's not typical. I came down to ask if you could take a look at him, sir."

Without a word the surgeon strode off down the white corridor, and rather hesitantly Tremaine followed him. As they approached the lift, he hurried forward and opened the gates. Sir Charles stepped in.

"You'd better come too," he ordered the young man. "What did you say your name was?"

"Tremaine, sir."

Sir Charles grunted and they stood side by side in silence as the lift rose up through the hospital—a hard-faced, heavy-jowled man, squat and lumpy in his expensive suit, and a lean young Cornishman clutching his overcoat and feverishly checking back on that diagnosis of 'something intracranial'. 'But it must be right,' he thought as he mentally listed the signs for the sixth time, and suddenly he stopped worrying about it and caught himself wondering if he'd ever be as famous as Sir Charles.

And then they were back in that hushed, luxurious room where Everard Nicholson lay inert and noisy on the thick grey carpet.

He knelt by the body and watched fascinated as Sir Charles made his examination. The surgeon's exploring fingers had the uncanny prescience of a blind man's hands and he used them with a kind of animal virtuosity—with the ease and certainty that startles one sometimes when one sees a leaping cat, or a bird planing down wind. But it wasn't only his hands; Geoff found himself acutely aware of formidable mental equipment at work inside that unwieldy-looking head. A thrill of vocation went through the young man as he watched and his anxiety about his own diagnosis seemed suddenly trivial.

Sir Charles had finished, he was stumbling clumsily to his feet.

"Did you get any history?" he asked Tremaine.

"No, sir, I'm afraid not."

The surgeon turned his intimidating stare on Bennett and Bates:

"Noticed anything unusual about Nicholson recently?" he asked abruptly.

The two contrasted faces watched him and the prone body uneasily. Bates spoke first.

"Well, as a matter of fact, sir, yes. I think I can say I have."

There was a pause and Tremaine saw Nicholson's young assistant glance thoughtfully at the recumbent body. 'He's afraid his chief might come back at him,' Geoff thought.

"Well, come on," Sir Charles barked impatiently. "We haven't all morning for this, you know."

"No, sir, I understand, sir. I was just—er—marshalling my facts." He smiled ingratiatingly. "Not being a medical man, I'm not too sure of the significance——"

"I'll be judge of that. Just tell me anything unusual you may have noticed."

"Well, sir, I believe Mr. Nicholson has suffered from headaches recently. I had the impression that they were severe enough to affect his behaviour to some extent."

"Yes. In what way?"

"Well, sir, his manner . . . and—er—his language have been somewhat unusual. The pain appeared to make him . . . irritable, one might say. And rather confused at times. In normal health Mr. Nicholson has an excellent memory, a very—er—retentive memory. . . . But recently, there seemed to be a change. I have been rather concerned about Mr. Nicholson's health recently, sir."

The surgeon grunted. "And you?"—he turned to Bennett—"have you noticed anything?"

Bennett didn't seem anxious to express his opinions. He considered the question without change of expression.

"Possibly," he agreed, "there may well be something in what Mr. Bates says. Quite possibly, yes."

The surgeon looked explosive, but evidently decided to contain himself.

Bates made a slight whirring sound as if speech were returning to him; Sir Charles raised his eyebrows.

"Something occurred to you?"

"Well, sir, it's a little intangible, perhaps, but I thought perhaps I should mention it. I did wonder whether Mr. Nicholson's vision might be troubling him recently. There were one or two little incidents that were rather surprising, and that seemed the most likely hypothesis, sir."

The eyes of the two doctors met for a second.

"Yes," said Sir Charles, in answer to the young man's unspoken question, "probably a cerebral tumour. We shall have to relieve this right away." He took a paper from his pocket. "I'll take him first on my list this afternoon . . . that'll give X-ray time to get the angiogram done. As you're new you'd better ask Harcourt to lay it on for me. Tell him to alert Hamilton for two o'clock, we shall need a frozen section if it's a tumour." He was almost through the door when he turned back, "Oh, and, Tremaine . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm admitting my daughter for an A.P. One of you find out which room they've put her in, will you?"

Down in the X-ray department Sir Charles's small daughter wondered what was happening. It seemed to her that she had been lying on the couch in Dr. Rogers's office for an enormous time. A long while ago Sister had helped her out of the strange white buttonless garment in which they had taken pictures of her chest and the nurse's kind cold hands had quickly dressed her thin child's body that couldn't seem to keep well, and settled her as cosily as possible on the couch with a book and a blue rug.

Charlotte Hallet hadn't expected to see Daddy again, he was always so busy . . . but why didn't Mummy come? The little girl tried to read her book, but inside herself she knew that Mummy hadn't come sooner because her chest was bad again, and horrid shivers of fright kept shaking her as she lay there listening to the strange voices, and she wondered whether they would keep her inside the big hospital this time, and what they would do to her.

Her heart pounded as a familiar step sounded in the corridor outside and then Mummy came in, smiling and familiar . . . but Charlotte looked at her and knew that it wasn't all right. Dr. Rogers came in too, but not Daddy.

Jean looked down at the anxious grey eyes that searched her face with such disturbing discernment. As if the destroying bacillus weren't enough, her little daughter was an ugly duckling, or so Charles regarded her, she thought bitterly. Aching with maternal protectiveness, Jean looked at the pathetic little heap that was her daughter's wasted body under the rug, and back to those speaking eyes, little Charlotte's one undeniable beauty. What words could there be that would take the ache of fear away, the fear that choked her own throat and made her heart pump so that her whole frame shook with it? But even as she dressed up her face with smiles and comfort, the small voice spoke:

"It's come back again, hasn't it? The . . . the bacillus?"

The ominous Latin word on the childish tongue seemed infinitely pathetic to the radiologist; he broke in quickly:

"It isn't anything for you to be frightened about, Charlotte," he smiled reassuringly, "not any more. Now if you'd been born fifty years ago then you and your Mummy and I would all have been frightened, but your little bacillus isn't a dragon any more. We've learnt how to deal with him, you see."

The brilliant eyes looked up at them searchingly, but the child had stopped trembling. Outside a trolley rumbled by taking a patient back to his ward. Charlotte said:

"What about now? What will they do to me?"

Alan Rogers watched Jean's face as she talked to her young daughter, trying with words and a mother's smile to clothe the alarming with the commonplace, the strange with the familiar. The rib-cage and its shadows appeared before his mental vision, were ranged against a host of others; mentally he sheafed through the case-notes, the progress reports, the later follow-up. His assessment settled and hardened. . . . Realising suddenly that Jean was looking at him, he asked:

"Shall I carry Charlotte across for you?"

Up on the private wing, Sister Craig was stocky and freckled and sandy-haired and her Scot's tongue was confident and kind. Charlotte began to feel that perhaps being handed over to strange people to have unknown things done to you wasn't such a very world-shaking event after all.

With no more need to smile, Jean walked away down the polished corridor, her high heels measuring out the increasing distance in regular staccato clicks, like a heart that beats lup-dup, lup-dup, lup-dup, until one day it stops and nothing, no desperate wish, no power of love will ever make it beat again. The closed doors spoke to her as she passed of people who lay inside, of sick people who would recover, for whom this would be just a break in the normal continuity of existence; of sick people for whom reality had telescoped down to pain and the relief of pain; of sick people for whom this was the last fight, the final tortuous track down into silence.

Busy nurses, starched and bright in their blue and white and young doctors in white coats and baggy trousers smiled vaguely at her as she passed, with varying degrees of recognition. As always in Charles's hospital, she was aware that her husband was respected, but not liked.

"Oh, hullo—er—good morning, Lady Hallet," Dr. Harcourt greeted her.

Jean recognised the registrar as one of her husband's juniors; not that junior is a very good word for him, she thought—he must be as old as I am. Chris Harcourt had been a bomber pilot and had taken up medicine after the war. She remembered Charles's comments:

"I don't care what he's been. The man's an idiot to attempt the impossible."

"But it's what he'd been planning all through those years," she'd remonstrated; "he wasn't to know it would prove impossible."

"Surgery's a competitive game these days, Jean; the weak go to the wall. Why they happen to be weak doesn't signify."

And the wretched part of it was that in practice Charles's opinion, however unpalatable, was probably right.

Now as she met the registrar's gaze, she was dimly aware even through her worry, of the glance he gave her fashionable clothes and of the wall they and her title seemed to erect between the two of them.

Forcing a smile, Harcourt continued energetically:

"I'm just on my way to see your daughter."

She smiled back rather forlornly, wanting to say, 'Look after her, she's little, and she's frightened and she can't help being Sir Charles's daughter'; but though she couldn't say it, perhaps he understood after a fashion, for his false smile dropped away and the eyes that looked into hers for a moment were as sombre as her own.

She pushed through the last swing doors and walked down the steps, away from the closed world that smelled of antiseptic and anaesthetic, and the sharp air of the everyday world in the street outside made the fear in her heart burn the more brightly.

Chapter Two

The morning had gone by and already to Geoff Tremaine the only reality outside the walls of St. Justin's was his wife's face smiling gaily as she waved him and JYL goodbye in the frosty morning air. 'I must ask Chris about digs,' he thought, as he searched the sea of heads in the hospital canteen for his friend's curly light brown hair and R.A.F. moustache. 'Ah!' Across the big room a tall, fair fellow in a white coat stood up and began to make his way between the tables with a lanky, limping stride.

Geoff grinned in salute and began to work his way down the room. He frowned as he drew nearer—something had happened to his friend . . . he looked all wrong; the cheerful humorous face he remembered was sullen and preoccupied and dressed up with a paper smile.

'If it were anyone but Chris,' thought Geoff as he clasped his friend's hand, 'I'd say he was dead scared,' and he frowned again as he followed the limping figure to one of the crowded tables. The wise-cracking ex-flyer had been rather a hero to the younger men he had trained with.

"So you're Tremaine, are you?" The speaker sat at the head of Chris's table; he was a small man but his voice rose without difficulty above the roar of the hospital canteen, no mean achievement when the medical population of St. Justin's was wielding its cutlery and exercising its jaws with food and 'shop'.

"Harcourt told me you were around somewhere. Sit down, man, if you want any lunch," the voice added as Geoff agreed that he was Tremaine and hovered uncertainly by an empty chair. "You're due in the theatre in twenty minutes, and woe betide you if you're late for Sir Charles!"

Geoff sat down hastily and Chris whispered in his ear, "Peter Lamb, our senior registrar."

Lamb was stoking up and temporarily silent, but Tremaine found himself being measured up by a pair of disconcertingly penetrating eyes that twinkled at him out of a dourly humorous face. Next to the senior registrar and physically dwarfing him was a huge exuberant young fellow with a freckled face and red hair. He grinned now and Geoff smiled gratefully back, relieved to find someone younger than himself. There were two women at the table too, he noticed, and he distributed a vague greeting in their direction and began to eat.

"So you want to be a neuro-surgeon, eh?" Peter Lamb was in voice again.

Geoff swallowed his own mouthful hastily:

"Well—um—I gather it's a rather presumptuous ambition, sir . . . but that's the general idea."

"Done any surgery?"

"Well . . . just the usual sort of thing, in my pre-registration year you know . . . and some straightforward stuff in general practice."

"Hm. What made you give your practice up?"

Geoff stared at him doubtfully; suddenly he caught a gleam in the older man's eyes and he answered with a grin:

"Well, it was getting married really, sir . . . it went to my head!"

The laugh spread round the table.

"So you thought you'd try the golden road to specialisation?" Lamb summed up for him.

"That's right, sir."

"Well, I expect you know you're an ass so I won't rub it in." Lamb pushed away his plate and began rolling himself a cigarette.

"All I can say is I'd a lot rather be a rich man looking for the eye of the needle than a registrar hoping to be a consultant!"

"Well, at least the first dilemma isn't likely to worry me," Geoff answered, grinning.

Lamb's beautifully kept hands raised the little tube of tobacco to his mouth and he ran the tip of his tongue along the paper.

"You've got something there," he answered as he put it between his lips. He struck a match and inhaled hungrily. "Well, you're not alone, as others have said before us. Which reminds me, you haven't met the others, have you . . . ?"

"Harcourt, I gather you know; this Goliath on my left" —he cocked his head back and grinned sardonically up at the ginger eyebrows and ferocious red hair—"is Dai Davies, our pre-reg. house-surgeon, and our two fair ladies are Susan Faraday from the Path. Lab. and Molly Summers, house-physician."

Tremaine grinned and muttered in the approved fashion of newly introduced Britons; he noted for future reference that Susan was tall with short, light brown hair and was probably about thirty, whereas Molly was small and pale and dark-haired. She was also younger and very pretty.

"There's a rumour going round the hospital that you found Mr. Nicholson in coma this morning," Susan Faraday said. "Can it be true?"

"He's in coma all right—Sir Charles is operating on him this afternoon," Lamb remarked. "So it was you who had the honour of examining our precious Everard, was it?"

"Well, yes, I did examine him," Tremaine answered, a little startled by the senior registrar's tone. "The chap opened the door and I saw him lying on the carpet. I didn't know quite what to do but——"

"Don't worry, I wasn't suggesting you should have left him there. Even Everard should have had the benefit of the Hippocratic Oath though he wouldn't exactly appreciate it—he's allergic to medicine men. Never could understand myself why the chap chose to work in a hospital!"

Chris Harcourt gave a rather uneasy laugh. "I don't think Tremaine knows what we're talking about," he said. "I didn't say anything about Nicholson when he told me he was coming here. As he'd already got the job, it seemed rather pointless. And anyway——"

"Better a job with Everard in your hair than no job at all, yes, quite."

Tremaine frowned in bewilderment. "I don't think I've quite cottoned on," he said.

Lamb laughed. "Don't worry, you will soon enough—at least——" He stopped suddenly and a curiously expectant silence gathered over the table.

"Now that I come to think of it," his powerful voice announced oracularly, "whether Everard gets up to his tricks again is going to depend on what you find in his cranium this afternoon."

"Mightn't the something in his cranium explain the—er eccentricity, or whatever it is?" Tremaine suggested tentatively.

Lamb's bright glance regarded him humorously for a few seconds.

"No."

"Oh." Geoff resolutely filled his mouth with food.

"It's been more psychic than somatic up to now," remarked Chris, coming to his friend's rescue. "Feller thinks he's God—you know the sort of thing."

"Seems a bit hard on God, really," remarked Lamb reflectively. "I've always seen our Everard in the OGPU myself. Bad luck really, he got born into the wrong country!" He handed his empty plate to the waitress and took a cup of coffee.

"But Chris and I have been here some time," he went on after the woman had gone, "maybe we've got him out of proportion. What do you think, Davies, eh?" He grinned rather mischievously up at the young Welshman.

Dai's incipient reply was drowned in a gargantuan sneeze.

His freckled, hairy hand went to the pocket of his white coat in search of a handkerchief. It came out holding a folded sheet of paper.

"What on earth . . ." he muttered; his big fingers unfolded it and he began to read. The others watched his ginger eyebrows climb his forehead in ludicrous astonishment. He looked round the table in consternation:

"Hell, is this someone's idea of a joke?" he asked in bewilderment. "Listen:

> "'*Don't imagine that it doesn't come back to me when you speak of me with less than proper respect; it may interest you to know that I have proof that you were sprawned by a killer.*'"

There was a moment's silence. Then Susan Faraday looked straight across at him and asked:

"Is that *your* white coat, David?"

"Of course." The young Welshman shrugged it off one shoulder and read the name-tape inside. Some indefinable expression rapidly crossed his face.

"Yeah," he reiterated, "it's mine alright." He crumpled up the letter and thrust it back into his pocket.

"Some damn fool's idea of a joke, I'd say," he remarked casually. "Beastly poor taste to my way of thinking."

Peter Lamb's clever brown eyes regarded him thoughtfully.

"Actually it's interesting that you should have found that," he remarked. "I've suspected we'd got a joker of that sort in our midst."

He looked in a preoccupied fashion at his rolled cigarette which had gone out, and laid it carefully on his coffee saucer. His hand went to his waistcoat pocket:

"I keep mine farther inland," he remarked. "White coats are a temptation to the ungodly." His fingers came out holding a similar folded sheet.

"Look at this," he said.

Chris looked up at him, startled.

"Read it," commanded Lamb. Harcourt frowned as his eyes ran over the few lines of typescript. He folded it over again.

"Pass it round."

They read it one by one, grimacing but in silence, until it was Dai's turn:

"But damn it, this isn't a joke!" The big red head jerked up in youthful indignation. "If there are two of these it must mean . . ."

"Exactly," said Lamb.

"But, golly!"—the Welshman's dismay was almost comical—"it can't be allowed, it's . . . it's libel!"

Lamb hunched his shoulders and looked round the table.

"As a matter of strict fact, this one"—he picked up his own and returned it to his pocket—"this one is perfectly true."

They expostulated.

"Oh, yes, it is. Hardly a fair representation of the facts perhaps, but nevertheless, in essence, true. She was fifteen, tuberculous and mentally deficient; she had V.D., too. An obvious case for a planned abortion. Her father was a drunken old twister; I think someone told him there might be compensation if he screeched about it.

"Didn't matter to me; my conscience was clear. Actually he soon shut up when the mother came along with a bit of evidence he'd kept to himself.

"Sorry, have I shocked anyone?" He grinned derisively. "I forget I'm such a grandfather among you nice young things!"

He picked up his half-smoked cigarette and relit it. A thought seemed to strike him for he took the letter out of his pocket and examined it carefully.

"You know," he remarked after a moment, "it's really very short-sighted of our scandal-mongering friend to type these. If we care to take the trouble, I've no doubt we could trace him through his typewriter."

A curious sound, something between a snort and a gasp made him look round suddenly. Sitting alone at the next table was Alfred Jonson, the consultant anaesthetist . . .

for a moment the dazed white face continued to stare at the younger man; behind the rimless circles of glass Lamb caught a glimpse of magnified, pale eyes. It was somehow an embarrassing encounter—Lamb frowned uncomfortably and turned back to his companions.

Chris glanced at his watch.

"We'd better get up there," he said; and Geoff thought, 'It's in his voice too. Only something really beastly could have changed him so much in two years.' As he and Dai waited for Chris to extricate his game leg from the table he became suddenly aware of Molly Summers; she was looking up at his friend with the sort of anxiety that only love could account for. Her lambent green and gold eyes resting hesitantly on his averted face, she asked:

"Are you starting with Mr. Nicholson this afternoon?"

But Chris had already turned away and it was Dai Davies who answered her, his Welsh voice more than usually sympathetic, Geoff noticed.

"I'm doing a cordotomy in number four theatre," remarked Lamb in his rather strident tones. "If I'm finished first I'll look in on you. I'll own I'm curious to know what's been lurking in our Everard's cranium."

Chapter Three

"What's a frozen section?" the young probationer asked as she and Theatre Sister wheeled the last trolley of shining instruments into position near the operating-table.

"Is it a special kind of anaesthetic?"

Sister Grahame smiled under her mask.

"No," she answered, "it is not. It's a kind of biopsy."

The young nurse said nothing and Sister glanced at her with half-humorous sternness.

"Of course you can tell me what a biopsy is, can't you, Parker?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so," the probationer answered doubtfully. "It's the little bit the surgeon cuts off the tumour to send down to the Path. Lab."

Sister nodded approvingly. "Quite right. Well, when that little bit as you call it gets down to the lab., it's processed, made into a slide, that is, so that the pathologist can study it under a microscope. He can tell from the individual cells whether the tumour they came from is cancerous or harmless. If it's malignant then there is a second operation and the surgeon takes out the tumour and any glands it may have spread to. I expect you know all that."

Eighteen-year-old Nurse Parker wrinkled her smooth forehead:

"I know now," she said hopefully.

"Good. Well, all that takes several days and with some tumours you can't afford to wait so long, especially as once you've cut them the cancer cells may escape into the bloodstream and be carried to some other part of the body where they'll begin to grow and make a secondary tumour. Once that happens it's too late to operate.

"So when the surgeon wants to have an answer at once, he asks for a frozen section. Then the pathologist can diagnose the tumour in a few minutes while the patient is still under the anaesthetic. . . ."

"And if it's malignant I suppose the surgeon takes it all out then, before it's had time to spread?" Nurse Parker finished for her in a rush.

"Yes, that's right, it's . . . oh, here they come."

The swing doors opened and two orderlies wheeled the patient in on a high tubular trolley. He was robed in dark green and blankets and bedsocks were keeping him warm.

Sister Grahame looked down at him in surprise:

"Just a moment," she told the orderlies. . . . "I'm afraid there's been a mistake. Sir Charles is operating on Mr. Nicholson in here."

Dai Davies appeared in the doorway, grinning:

"It's all right, Sister," he said, "there's been no mistake. I've got the balance of Mr. Nicholson here!" And the irrepressible Welshman balanced a neat brown toupée with distinguished iron-grey temples on his own red head.

Sister Grahame just managed that straight face that discipline demanded.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Davies, I see . . . that . . . elucidates the matter."

She took charge of the trolley and, still grinning, the young houseman handed the toupée over to the orderlies and joined Chris and Geoff who were already getting capped and masked.

"I never guessed, did you?" he whispered. "It's those grey temples . . . quite a master-touch, don't you think?"

Geoff smiled at him—the young Welshman was easy to like.

Someone was pressing one of the swing doors very slowly ajar; it was so unlike the brisk swing that usually ushered people in that Geoff found himself staring at it curiously. For a few seconds a short white figure showed hazily through the frosted glass and then the door opened a little farther and Alfred Jonson slipped round it.

For a moment his face was turned towards the young man, and Tremaine saw the great theatre lamp reflected in those two rimless circles of glass that shone at him blankly between cap and mask. The effect was curiously bizarre. . . . 'I'm getting too damned impressionable,' Geoff thought half amusedly . . . 'my first day and all that, I suppose.' And suddenly his mind was filled with the image of his wife, standing on the frosty pavement among JYL's rugs and lamps and the big aluminium kettle, smiling happily as she waved him off . . . dear Anne!

'I've seen that tall dark fellow today,' his thoughts continued as his attention returned to the theatre . . . 'of course, this morning when I barged in on Sir Charles . . . he's Rogers, the radiologist.'

And now, all over the theatre, attention sharpened as the brain surgeon himself sailed in. He brusquely acknowledged the general salaam and turned to his patient.

The others saw Sir Charles's pale bulbous eyes begin to bulge dangerously as he stared at the man on the table; suddenly they narrowed and he bent forward, his plethoric face taking on a puzzled air as he peered closely at the unconscious man.

"Good God, Sister," he exclaimed, "that's a pretty clean shave, isn't it?"

"It wasn't necessary to shave him, sir," Sister began, and Davies, his lumpy face comic even now that he wanted to be sober, completed the explanation.

"Astonishing," Sir Charles commented. "I thought for a moment that you'd brought me the wrong man."

Rogers laughed. "I went through the same stages when they brought him in to me," he remarked. "I'd never have believed a mere toupée could make such a difference. But, of course, those heavy glasses and his front teeth all add to it. . . . I've got the plates from the angiogram here," he went on in a different tone.

The masked doctors gathered round the lighted X-ray frames while he demonstrated the subtle disturbance in the vascular pattern that probably indicated the presence of a tumour. The glassed-off gallery at the far end of the theatre had filled up now with medical students, and Rogers's voice was relayed through the partition as he explained to them how he had outlined the blood vessels in the brain by injecting an opaque fluid into the carotid artery, the X-ray plates being exposed with split-second timing to record the picture before the contrast medium had time to flow away as the blood pulsed through the brain.

Parker, the little probationer, stared with lively interest at the lighted plates. She tried to follow what the doctors were talking about, but she hadn't yet reached that stage of sophistication when the great bones of the skull with shockingly enormous teeth could be disregarded, and her attention wandered from the complex discourse of the experts.

Sir Charles had mapped his approach to the brain and was now supervising the orderlies as they propped the unconscious man in a half-sitting posture on the table.

The swing doors opened again and a tall lean Scot walked in; it was Hamilton, the pathologist, in preparation for the frozen section. He nodded vaguely at his colleagues and wandered over towards the lighted X-ray frames. Passing the table, he glanced at the patient . . . and suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. Between the white mask and cap his frosty-blue eyes were fixed in a rigid stare on the pink hairless head and vacant features of the unconscious man. . . .

Rogers looked up.

"Hullo, Robert," he said, "you look as if you've seen a ghost!"

Something flickered in Hamilton's face as he turned away from the sick man.

"I thought I had for a moment," he remarked. "Who is that? I thought it was going to be Everard Nicholson."

"It is," Rogers answered. The pathologist was close to the table now and he added *sotto voce:*

"Sans hair, front teeth and specs, not to mention consciousness!"

"Good God." Hamilton leaned over the table staring intently at the naked skull. Following his focus, Rogers could just pick out the jagged line of an old scar on the shiny bald surface.

Sir Charles turned round, holding up his dripping hands —he'd been scrubbing up. He joined the other two men and stared intently at the scar.

"Wish we could have got a history from him," he remarked. "Anyone know where he was before he came here?"

They discussed it.

"I think he's been here as long as any of us," Rogers said.

Chris, remembering the occasion, said slowly:

"He mentioned once that he'd been in the army."

"Well, we can't leave him in coma while we chase that up," Sir Charles stated finally. He began getting into his gloves.

"It's probably irrelevant anyway, it isn't an operation scar."

He nodded at Jonson and the little pale man set to work with his anaesthetic apparatus. Above the machine, enclosed in glass cylinders, the brightly coloured cone-shaped indicators rose and fell on shafts of gas, like ping-pong balls on jets of water, as the anaesthetist adjusted his mixture. Through the rubber tube in his windpipe the patient drew the gently hissing gas down into his lungs and the bladder on the machine began evenly to swell and shrink, distending and collapsing like the breathing sac of an octopus.

Up in their gallery the students waited expectantly; there was no sound in the theatre now but the gentle hiss of gas and a tiny click and puff, click and puff as each spent breath forced its way through the exit valve.

Jonson nodded, his glasses flashing as the bright light bounced off them, and Sir Charles painted landmarks on the smooth pink pate with a brush dipped in blue dye. Sister Grahame handed him the shining knife and he made a long curved cut through the hairless skin, past the fat and muscle down to the bone. The scalp parted in two neat flaps and standing to left and right of Sir Charles, Harcourt and Tremaine applied retractors and spencer wells to hold it apart and stop the bleeding.

Peering from behind the trolley where she was stationed young Nurse Parker saw the white skull with the tiny zigzag lines of its natural sutures running evenly away from the centre, like the panels of a football, she thought. Sir Charles painted on some further landmarks; Rogers nodded in unconscious agreement. When he had finished, Sister Grahame handed the surgeon the stainless steel bit and brace and he began to bore his first burr-hole into the thick bone.

"Trephining," said Sir Charles's heavy voice, over the hiss of the anaesthetic and the biting of the steel drill into the bone, "trephining the skull may be said to have a long history."

His colleagues smiled faintly, they knew this one.

Neolithic man practised it. Their object was to facilitate the egress of evil spirits. Whether the patient thus relieved survived the operation, history does not record."

Behind their glass partition the students grinned and stored up the remark for future use.

Standing by the bared skull, Chris Harcourt reflected on what he knew of the unconscious man; it seemed to him rather a pity that Sir Charles was not a neolithic surgeon. He glanced surreptitiously at the masked faces bent intently over the table. Had Sir Charles's 'evil spirits' touched off an answering train in the minds of these other men now labouring to save Everard Nicholson? Not easy to read faces whose eyes alone are visible. Yet there had been a faint tremor in Sir Charles's hand while it held the knife for a waiting second above the bald skull. Sir Charles never suffered from intention tremor . . . and Hamilton, that most phlegmatic of men, how odd he had been when he suddenly saw Nicholson propped up there . . . and that scar he'd found . . . it couldn't have been visible from where the pathologist was standing. It was almost as though . . . yes, that was it, it was as though the pathologist had expected to find it here . . .

Sir Charles had completed his burr-hole. Little Nurse Parker watched intently as Sister handed him a long, thin, metal tube, what was it called, a—yes a cannula. Inside the cannula there was a very long needle. Sir Charles carefully inserted these into his burr-hole. His face took on an air of remote concentration as he probed with the needle into the substance of the brain at the bottom of the narrow pit. Nurse Parker knew, because Sister Grahame had told her so, that the brain surgeon could tell from the resistance he felt on his probing needle whether he was touching normal brain, or some alien growth. But it does seem impossible all the same, she thought.

In the taut silence the gentle hiss of the anaesthetic sounded as huge and ominous as an escaping main. Geoff Tremaine could feel the beads of sweat starting out between the black hairs under his white surgeon's cap. His own breath checked and stumbled as he listened for the tiny click and puff of the unconscious patient's exhaled breath. The tinkling clatter of the spencer wells as he swabbed the wound nearly made him jump.

Sir Charles's big head sketched a faint negative. Needle and cannula were withdrawn and Sister again handed him the shining brace and bit. He began to bore a second hole very near the first.

'Of course, if it is malignant,' thought Chris Harcourt as the boring went slowly forward, 'he'd have a few months at the outside . . . he'd be unfit for work . . . mental symptoms would be expected so that anything he might say . . . wouldn't find much credence. But if it's benign on the other hand . . . Thank God Hamilton's to do a frozen, at least we shall know soon. . . .'

Harcourt was not alone in his speculating. Behind other masked faces the same debate went forward. Was Fate, whose extraordinary machinations had placed them in this paradoxical situation, was Fate, from laughing at them now planning a quixotic *volte-face?* If Nicholson's tumour were malignant, then . . .

Sir Charles inserted the needle and cannula into the second burr-hole.

'He's found it,' Hamilton thought, watching the surgeon's face. 'It'll soon be my turn now.' As though swinging a lever he thrust down the speculations that the sudden sight of the scarred bald head had started up. This is any frozen, on any patient. Personalities don't enter into medicine, his conscious mind dictated. But remotely he heard another voice saying, if it should be malignant . . .

Leaving the cannula in place, Sir Charles gently withdrew the needle. Sister handed him a syringe. The surgeon inserted its nozzle into the socket at the top of the cannula and drew steadily on the plunger. There was a sucking sound and bloodstained fluid came bubbling up. Keeping the pressure on the plunger he withdrew the syringe and cannula from the deep narrow hole. Holding the syringe over a small jar he drove the plunger home. On the bottom of the jar, islanded in red fluid, was a tiny lump of flesh measuring perhaps three pinheads. Sir Charles stared at it for a second.

"There you are," he said, and handed the jar to Hamilton. The pathologist disappeared into the anteroom where his apparatus was waiting and a moment later an apologetic, small figure slipped in after him. Sister Grahame had sent Nurse Parker to see for herself.

"Want to watch?" asked Dr. Hamilton's technician. He was young and cheerful and Nurse Parker stopped wishing that the earth would open and swallow her up. Dr. Hamilton gave her a remote smile and then appeared to forget she was there.

The tiny fragment of tissue was now in the centre of a small, round, hollow stage on the freezing microtome.

Carbon dioxide was blowing up through the perforated floor, forming a thick white cloud and puffing explosively as it came, like a steam train. The stage became covered with hoar frost and in the centre of it the tiny soft lump visibly turned solid.

Smith, the technician, turned off the gas and the white clouds died away. Poised to swing horizontally through the tiny fragment of flesh was the microtome knife, its blade far sharper than a razor.

Frowning a little, Smith stared at the minute speck of flesh in the centre of the stage, and his right hand reached out to the knife. . . .

"Are you going to cut it in two?" Nurse Parker asked him.

Smith looked away from the little scrap of tumour for a moment and grinned at her:

"God forbid! I want twelve slices now, and some over to take down to the lab.," and frowning again at the tiny speck he sent the knife right through it with a slow, steady swing.

Clinging to the surface of the blade was a transparent, wrinkled slice of flesh, three pinheads long and five thousandths of a millimetre thick. The two young people exchanged a quick smile, and then with infinite care and a camel's-hair brush Smith detached the slice from the knife and floated it off in a bowl of water.

When he had cut a dozen sections Smith stared into the bowl, selecting the best; taking a glass slide, he brought it up under the slice he'd chosen. The tiny rasher of flesh clung to the glass in folds. Folds distort cell patterns and Nurse Parker watched Smith patiently floating it clear and catching it again on his little piece of glass until the fragment of flesh lay perfectly flat.

"Is it ready now?" the girl asked.

Smith shook his head. "Has to be stained," he answered and she watched the slide move at thirty-second intervals through different-coloured dyes, emerging at last as a pink and purple island in a sea of glass. The slide was now ready for diagnosis.

Hamilton slid it under the microscope and peered through the eyepieces.

He knew at once that it was benign. A meningioma. Sir Charles would remove it and Nicholson would recover. . . .

He spent a few seconds checking his automatic recognition and stood up. He glanced at his watch, he had been away from the theatre exactly eight minutes.

They were all waiting for him, seven masked faces their eyes on him expectantly.

"It's a meningioma."

There was a moment of flat silence.

Geoff turned a puzzled look from one masked face to another. . . . 'Am I mad or are they?' he wondered uneasily. 'From the way they're looking you'd think they wanted it to be malignant. . . .'

Suddenly he knew that something was wrong. Those steady exhalations had altered rhythm, the bladder on the anaesthetic machine no longer deflated but began to swell larger, and again larger. Jonson was squeezing it with his hands, forcing the gas into the flaccid lung. For a few seconds there was no change, then the bladder shuddered and began to contract, and the click and puff jerkily came to life.

Tremaine felt his own hot breath escaping into the mask as he breathed again.

"He's all right now," Jonson told the surgeon.

Sir Charles grunted and Sister Grahame handed him the bit and brace again. He cut another four burr-holes to form a ring with the first two, introduced a thin plate of pliable metal to protect the surface of the brain, and proceeded to cut the skull from burr-hole to burr-hole until a complete round bone-flap could be lifted out.

'God, there's that intention tremor again,' Chris suddenly noticed as the surgeon's knife paused above the glistening white dura mater, the bag that encloses and protects the brain. 'Not that it makes any difference to the old devil's skill,' he thought, as Sir Charles completed the incision.

Nurse Parker, back again behind her trolley, suppressed a gasp as the patient's brain suddenly became visible inside that unnatural hole in his head. The whole creamy, corrugated mass with its network of tiny blood vessels shook with each beat of his heart . . . it was really quite horrible . . . she took a deep breath and there being no one else to do it, reproved herself for her own squeamishness. Everyone was busy and no one had noticed. It occurred to her suddenly that they all looked very grim, except Sister Grahame of course, and that nice young Dr. Davies. He couldn't look grim if he tried with a face like that. 'I suppose it's the concentration,' she decided, and began to wonder what the tumour would look like.

At the table they had seen it. Just visible through the surface folds of the brain, in which it had excavated itself a nest, was the purplish wrinkled top of the soft tumour.

Gently Sir Charles manipulated the surface folds of the brain away from it and like a giant anemone the whole mass swayed into view.

"Quite a big one," remarked Hamilton, and Rogers nodded.

The surgeon grunted; he was hunting for the stalk that attached the meningioma to the dura mater.

He found it, cut it and shelled out the tumour.

"We shall have to cauterise this stalk well," he said, and Chris bent forward with the diathermy needle. The absurdity of his personal situation made everything ridiculously unreal. Gingerly, he moved the electric needle away from that vulnerable brain. He found that he was sweating grossly.

Sir Charles stitched up the dura mater, replaced the bone-flap and tied it on with catgut through tiny gimlet holes, stretched the scalp back on the bone so that his earlier landmarks were in perfect apposition, and stitched the first incision.

The operation was finished, the patient breathed steadily; though risks must always exist, there was every reason why Everard Nicholson should make a perfect recovery.

Chapter Four

As soon as he'd seen the tumour, Hamilton left the theatre and returned to his laboratory. He nodded rather absently at his technicians and his secretary, and seeing his face they forbore to ask him any questions. Smith would be down with the news soon. . . .

Hamilton walked into his own room, sat down at his microscope and lit his pipe; for a few seconds he smoked in silence, staring at the wall in front of him. Then as if impatient with his own thoughts, he bent forward and switched on the dictaphone beside the mike and started work.

The microscope's bright eye focused one by one on the tiny slices of flesh imprisoned in the glass slides; peering down at the enormously magnified cells, Hamilton began to assess the tumours they had come from and, beyond the tumours, the sick men and women—and their chances of recovery. Diagnosis followed diagnosis on the dictaphone's whirling discs. Tomorrow his clean Edinburgh diction with its faint trace of melancholy would play on and on in his secretary's office while she took them down in black and white to hand to the surgeons whose patients these were.

The big clock on the wall ticked the minutes away and the pile of reported slides grew steadily higher. At last they were all done and Robert Hamilton switched the machine off and leaned back in his chair. He gazed out of the window, but he didn't see the tall ward-blocks that were yellow with light now against the December sky. His mind had wandered seventeen years back and half the world away. Not tall buildings but thick jungle enclosed him, merciless, mindless, endless jungle, and heat, heat as solid and sticky as the mud the monsoons had left behind. Out of the sullen forest came the shriek of the brain-fever bird rising inexorably half-tone by half-tone, up and up, off the register into lunacy. . . . Long-ago scenes crowded in on him . . . the jeep on its way from the airstrip, churning its way through the mud with the mail . . . the thin, grey-blue squares and Alison's writing. . . .

A light knock sounded on the door and a moment later Susan Faraday came in, a tray of slides in her hand.

"Was it malignant?" she asked as she came up to him.

The revolving chair spun round and she started back in alarm. Hamilton seemed almost ferocious; but as he looked at her his habitual impassivity settled on his face again.

"Sorry," he said, his Scots accent more obtrusive than usual, "I didn't know you were there."

He relit his cold pipe.

"Was what malignant?"

"Nicholson's tumour."

"Oh that. Mm. No, it wasn't. It was a meningioma."

"Ah." She held out the tray of slides. "Here's the pleural effusion you wanted, sir—from Sir Charles's little girl."

"Oh yes, thank you." He looked at her with more attention. "You've just come over to me from the clinical side, haven't you?"

Her acquiescence in this statement was lost in the concentrated silence that followed as he peered down at the slide. Down the mike little Charlotte's bacilli appeared as tiny red dots in a sea of green.

"Mm." He switched on the dictaphone, then turned back to her saying:

"There's a tray of tea in here somewhere, help yourself. I'll just report this."

Susan looked with some amusement at the stone-cold tea, but obediently poured some out while the tape recorder quietly whirred and Hamilton's voice summed up the slide.

"What made you ask about Nicholson—you weren't in the theatre, were you?" he inquired as he poured himself a cup of tea.

Susan smiled uneasily. "Oh no," she answered. "I—well, the whole hospital seems to be talking about it."

Hamilton grunted and for a moment there was silence.

"Are you interested in this side of path.?" he asked at last.

"Oh yes . . . but I've everything to learn about it."

"Well, just so long as you know you don't know," remarked Hamilton encouragingly. He smiled at her with a sort of courteous remoteness. "You'll be able to shake hands with every cell in the body if you go on long enough. But perhaps you plan to go back to clinical work after your spell here?"

"I don't think I've really decided yet."

"No no, quite. Early days yet." But as he looked at her with more attention, it occurred to him that she was older than most of the trainees he taught.

"I gave up medicine soon after I qualified," she said, as though reading his thoughts. "I got married . . . and the first year being resident . . ."

"Yes, makes private life awkward." Hamilton was back in the past again . . . that first resident year was the only one they'd had, he and Alison. After that the war had come and he'd joined up. . . .

"It is awkward," Susan agreed. "I've a small boy to support. He—he misses me rather badly at the moment. But he'll get used to it of course."

"How long have you been back in medicine?"

"Six months."

"You'll be a registrar by next summer. You can live out then."

Susan smiled and Robert Hamilton had a sudden glimpse of someone unexpectedly appealing under this young woman's rather uncomfortable personality. 'She can't be more than thirty,' he thought, 'yet she moves as if she were much older . . . she's gracefully built too, curious. . . .'

But the smile had already gone and she was frowning as she qualified worriedly:

"If I get a job."

Hamilton puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. "There'll be a vacancy here by then. Price is going next June . . . you should stand a good chance."

She hesitated. "I expect you didn't hear about that transfusion last month . . . on Ward Six?"

He frowned. "I don't think so . . . it didn't come to p.m., did it?"

She shook her head quickly. "Oh no, they saved him. But it was a near thing. He'd received about half a pint of incompatible blood. The cross-matching was wrong."

"It isn't a perfect world and mistakes do happen," Hamilton remarked. "Anyway you realised something was wrong and put it right presumably?"

"Well, no . . . it's rather complicated. . . ." She looked up at him perplexedly.

"Mm?"

He saw her come to a decision. "Actually, you see, I didn't do it. I mean the cross-matching. I wasn't in the hospital that evening. I should have been, but Robin was ill, he was rather bad actually. . . . I fixed up with . . . with a colleague to do my work and went home to see him."

"Someone accustomed to cross-matching?"

"Oh yes."

"Well, what are you worrying about then?"

She laughed rather uncomfortably. "It must sound rather absurd, I'm afraid. And I'm keeping you, I'm sorry. . . ."

"No, no, that doesn't matter. I'll be glad to help if I can, but I don't quite see your problem."

For answer she opened her bag and took out a sheet of folded typescript.

"Would you mind reading that? I—I'm really awfully sorry to involve you in all this."

Hamilton unfolded the paper and read:

*'Why wait for ignominious dismissal when you can avoid this by resigning? You're not wanted here. You blunder as all women blunder. Don't imagine I don't know about that cross-matching you mucked up. GET OUT before disgrace catches up with you, you filthy b****.'*

Hamilton frowned at it distastefully.

"Yes, I see. Hmm. Very unpleasant." He was silent for a while.

"Well"—he smiled at her—"don't let it worry you as far as your job is concerned, you've told me the true position, and in any case—whoever wrote this is activated more by malice than by common sense."

He frowned as he read it through again.

"I shall be surprised if you're an isolated victim. You don't happen to know whether there are any others knocking about, do you?"

"Well, yes. Actually someone found a typed sheet that looked just like this one in the pocket of his white coat at lunch today. He didn't know what it was and read it out."

"Was it the same sort of thing?"

She grimaced. "Worse."

"Hmm. Looks as if we've a problem on our hands, doesn't it? Well, don't worry about it. I'm glad you told me. Perhaps you'd like to tell me if you get any others. In confidence, of course."

She thanked him gratefully. As he walked with her to the door of the laboratory she asked casually:

"What about the meningioma, were they able to get it out?"

"Oh yes. Hallet made a beautiful job of it. Nicholson'll be a great deal more comfortable without that lump on his brain."

"They usually make a good recovery, do they?"

"When it's been done as well as this one was. There are always risks, of course, haemorrhage into the brain, that sort of thing. But the chances are he'll do very well."

Chapter Five

The day's work was nearly done; tired nurses worked on the fat ward books, bringing their notes up to date. In half an hour the night staff would arrive to take over and before very long the bright lights in the wards would begin to go out and the long corridors would grow quiet until morning.

In his comfortable, impersonal room high up on the private wing, St. Justin's senior administrator lay breathing but unconscious in his bed. Suspended above him a 'drip' slowly and steadily fed blood into a vein in the soft flesh of his limp, extended arm.

In the next room along the corridor, little Charlotte Hallet lay quietly sleeping under the soft red light of the night-lamp. Her mother sat beside her watching the faint stir of every following breath; they came a little faster tonight than they had the night before. Jean's thoughts strained towards the one lung now labouring to do the work of two, and her breath came tight and fast as though her own fit lungs could somehow ease the burden for the sick child.

At last she stirred and got stiffly to her feet; for a moment she stood there leaning protectively over the bed, her eyes caressing the small face on the pillow. The warm light was kind to Charlotte's pale, thin cheeks . . . how peacefully she was sleeping. Perhaps this time . . . but sometimes our lips are afraid to form our prayers. Jean bent and kissed the warm head with its soft, silky hair, and crept silently from the room.

In the corridor outside she found Alan Rogers.

"How is she?" he asked.

She looked up at him, her face had the drained candid look that follows sometimes in the wake of grief and strain.

"She's sleeping, Alan . . . so peacefully."

"Good." His long, mobile mouth curved in the echo of a smile. "This is the treatment she needs, Jean. You must have faith in it—and in us."

"I do," she answered at once, and added shakily, "as far as I dare."

"I know." He stared down at her in silence, his lips compressed as though to hold back the words that came to them. Jean's luminous eyes suddenly turned a darker blue, and she dropped her lids and bent her head so that he couldn't see her face but only the smooth golden hair coiled into a silky knot above the white nape of her neck. The silence grew, until he asked abruptly:

"Is Charles picking you up?"

She shook her head and glanced up at him, her expression guarded. 'It's five years now and neither of us has got over it,' she thought, and somewhere beyond the sore rub of conscience and the hollow ache of anxiety a flame of forbidden happiness leapt in her heart. 'Oh God, how does one learn to fight love down,' she thought desperately, and sick fear choked her, the fear that little Charlotte's eaten-away lung was a horrible punishment exacted by Fate because she and Alan loved each other. She shivered and drew away from him.

He startled her by reading her thoughts.

"That sort of idea is totally unreasonable, you know."

She gave him a frightened glance. "Is it?"

"That isn't the way to help Charlotte," he went on, lowering his voice. "You can help her by being *you*, the you she knows and trusts. If you allow yourself to be hounded by superstitious fears, you'll frighten her too."

Jean sucked in a deep breath and let it out in a shaky sigh.

"Yes," she said at last, her voice hardly more than a whisper, "I see that . . . only . . ."

"I know. . . . How about getting home?" he asked a few moments later.

"I've got my car here. Charles had a meeting tonight."

Rogers thought of the titled woman patient with whom he had seen Sir Charles dining a week ago. Had there been a 'meeting' that night, he wondered. Aloud he said:

"I can't offer to drive you home then?"

She gave him a small smile. "No."

There was a rather tense pause.

He broke it by asking:

"Have you heard about Nicholson?"

"No. What about him?" She sounded startled.

Alan gave her a résumé of the day's events. Jean shook her head.

"I shouldn't say it now he's sick, but that man gives me the creeps . . . those dead-looking eyes behind his spectacles, and the way he has of looking at you, as if . . ." She shuddered. "Well, it's horrid anyway. And he's so fantastically curious . . . it's a disease with him, isn't it?"

Rogers agreed rather grimly.

Jean said hesitantly, "I'm sure it must be absurd . . . but I have wondered . . . he couldn't possibly have been in Florence when——"

Rogers said quickly, "No, of course not." But his fingers closed over the letter in his pocket and he thought privately, 'My God, I wonder . . . ?'

Jean smiled at him uneasily.

"No, it *is* absurd really, isn't it? I suppose it's just my guilty conscience. . . ."

Alan looked at her in distress.

"Jean, not again. You don't really want to think of it like that, do you?"

Her glance met his.

"No." She made herself look away. "Charles has apoplexy whenever Nicholson's name is mentioned," she went on, her tone changing as she spoke.

"Yes. I've noticed that. Everyone has wanted to get rid of him for years, but it never happens. He clings to the hospital like an octopus." His eyes travelled to the clock on the wall . . . it was late, there'd be no one in Nicholson's office now. . . .

When he had said good-bye to Jean, Rogers shut himself in his room and took the letter out of his pocket. Why didn't I think of Nicholson, he wondered, unfolding the typewritten note with vicious fingers. . . .

Downstairs in the residents' common room among the vociferous phones and the winking signal lights, was a large yellow-brown table; here the 'book-bashers' sat, frowningly pursuing their specialist degrees, and here, at the end of his first day at St. Justin's, sat Geoff Tremaine. Not that he was doing any 'bashing' as yet, his books still lay in a virgin pile before him—Geoff was writing to his wife. It was the first time they'd been parted and there was plenty he wanted to say—but how to find the words?

One of the phones gave a premonitory cough and then launched into its strident ring and he half rose, but a houseman was already answering it; the group of white-coated young doctors laughing over something by the fire, talked on quietly, one ear cocked for what the call might herald.

As the houseman hung up, the column of lights above the door winked into life and everyone's eyes flicked up at it . . . yellow, red, blue—Geoff relaxed, it wasn't for him. He picked up his pen again and began to write.

He was still writing when Peter Lamb came in.

"I'm off home," the senior registrar announced, peeling off his white coat and shrugging his way into his outdoor clothes. "Chris Harcourt's off until ten, so get in touch with me if you're worried about anything," he added to Geoff; "the switchboard has my number." He grinned suddenly.

"What's eating you?" his Rabelaisian voice inquired. "D'you want to go home too?"

Embarrassed, Geoff laughed. "You've said it," he admitted.

Lamb cocked his head and considered the young man thoughtfully. "Of course, I was forgetting, you're a married man, aren't you. . . . Found anywhere to live?"

Geoff shook his head. "I don't suppose you've heard of anything going, have you, sir?" he inquired tentatively.

The older man paused, his hard bright eyes distant, as though weighing something. 'He looks like a monkey, only much, much cleverer,' Geoff thought.

"Depends. Your old woman fussy?"

Geoff thought affectionately of his old woman and grinned.

"No," he answered, "not a bit."

"Hm. Well, we've got that awkward-sounding hybrid, a Maisonette." He burlesqued the word, Churchillian fashion. "It's not one of the Stately Homes of England, but it's just round the corner which is what counts in this job. In a rather passé crescent you'll find it, and it backs on to the railway, so you can look forward to the sigh of empty trains in midnight stations if that's any draw . . . not that sigh exactly describes what they get up to. But that's by the way. If you and your young woman really want somewhere to lay your heads, I'd try the chap at the end house. It's No. 11 and the owner's name is Honeywell."

Geoff took the address down eagerly. "And they've a room or two to spare, have they?"

"They had a couple of weeks ago. Honeywell gave me a lift when my old bus broke down . . . he's a decent chap. Runs a brand-new Hillman Minx . . . an elegant creature, made me feel quite covetous. But there we are, Honeywell's in sewage, which must be a good line when you come to think of it. . . . But to get back to your digs, he and his wife let their top floor to a pair of what he calls h'artists, and when I met him they'd just done a flit, leaving their goods and chattels in lieu of rent. I gather these consisted of what he calls idols, which seems improbable, if alluring. . . ."

Geoff laughed.

"Rum, isn't it?" agreed Lamb. "But the poor fellow's quite bothered about it, says the wife's superstitious about chopping them up for firewood and the dustman won't have 'em at any price. So they've left the things in possession up there and decided to quit letting. But if you and your Missis go and speak fair to them, my guess is he'll let you have it, idols and all."

"That's terrific, sir! Thanks awfully for putting me on to it. I'll go and ring my wife right away."

The two men went out together.

Molly Summers watched them go; then she rested her head on her hands again and stared down at her book. 'It's only three months,' she thought, 'since Chris and I were discussing where we could live out. . . .' And for the hundredth time she looked up to the clock on the wall; she'd been waiting fifty minutes now. 'If he's not here in another ten minutes, I'll go home,' she decided; 'at least I'd be giving pleasure to someone.'

But home called up its own pictures. . . . Molly looked at them unwillingly—the small room that smelt of too many unwashed bodies; the unremitting distraction of the radio that was never turned off; her father's long bony face and the hungry pride in his face when he looked at her; her mother's worn body with its droop of patient fatigue, her embarrassing eagerness to make everything cleaner and tidier than was possible for her doctor daughter; her elder brother's heavy defensive jokes . . . only with her three little sisters could she be really at home without strain. . . .

Dai Davies came charging in, his red hair still damp from its sweaty imprisonment under the surgeon's tight white cap. He'd just done an appendectomy on his own and was feeling elated. He grinned cheerfully at Molly as he settled himself and his pile of books at the table and for a moment her green and gold eyes shone at him out of her pale, five-pointed face; then she turned away and he could see only the fragile-looking line of cheek and jaw showing whitely against her soft dark hair. He opened his textbook and found his place, took out his notebook and bent his great head to his work, but it seemed impossible to forget that she was sitting there. It seemed impossible to forget her at any time, he thought resignedly. He hadn't known about Chris that first time she had smiled at him. . . .

"I'm glad someone thinks it's worth working," he remarked invitingly in his lilting Welsh voice. "My elders and betters over there"—he nodded at the group by the fire—"are always telling me I might as well save myself the trouble for all the jobs there are likely to be at the end of it. They've all got their specialist degrees so I suppose they really know what they are talking about . . . it does seem a bit of a mug's game, doesn't it. But then what can we do but try?" He smiled at her as he added ingenuously, "My dad's a miner, so this kind of life's rather new to me, you see."

Molly looked up at him and Dai's heart suddenly beat fast.

"Then it'll be the same for you as it is for me," he heard her say. "Mug's game or not, you haven't much choice."

He looked questioningly at her. 'He's like a big, shaggy dog,' she thought, looking up at the lumpy, freckled face, the uproarious hair, 'but no, that doesn't do him justice. He's good. Kind and reliable.' She hadn't meant to say any more, she found it better not to tell people, but somehow this time she did.

"My dad was on a minesweeper," she told him. "He came home minus both arms; his chest was a bit of a mess too. There wasn't enough left to fit artificial limbs so they taught him to paint with his toes . . . Christmas cards and things. They're very kind, they help him to sell them. But even with his pension it couldn't keep seven of us. So Mum took a factory job until some of us could earn too. When I qualified, Mum and Dad couldn't hardly believe they'd done it. I can't tell them I'll never be anything but a house-surgeon, can I?"

Dai wanted very much to find the right words to say, but he didn't have a chance; Chris Harcourt appeared in the doorway.

"Hullo, Molly, sorry I'm late," he said. And a moment later they left the room together. Dai returned silently to his books.

Chapter Six

It was cold outside; Chris strode moodily ahead and Molly found herself almost running to keep up with him. The December wind made darting attacks on their flapping overcoats as it whipped round the bleak grey corners. They came to a pub and with a muttered word he ushered her inside. The sudden warmth was like a welcome, but as the light fell on Chris's face it seemed to Molly that there was no comfort anywhere.

They found a quiet table; Chris held up his glass and suddenly Molly realised that he was waiting to clink it against hers before he drank. She looked down at the little glass of golden fluid and a host of happy evenings raced by, tearing at her heart. She saw her fingers closing on the stem . . . 'I can't bear it,' she decided suddenly, 'it's got to stop. I'll tell him, now.' And she picked up the glass and looked straight at him.

But the words that had been bubbling up died away in her throat and instead she said,

"Chris . . . I can't help you, can I? . . . I would so much like to."

Something seemed to flicker in his face and suddenly she realised that for this moment at least he was not only looking at her, but actually seeing her. It was as if a crack had opened in that hard brittle shell and as she saw inside it Molly was confounded to realise how distraught and afraid was the creature who now looked out at her. Like the cast-off casing of a chrysalis, her own protective skin of diffidence dropped away and her hazel eyes sparkled with love and courage.

Chris felt a stir of hope . . . only it didn't last. His shoulders sagged again, he glanced furtively round; the pub was full and noisily cheerful. His gaze came back to her unwillingly.

Molly leant nearer and spoke very quietly.

"Trust me, Chris," she said. Suddenly she knew that she had reached him.

"It's about those anonymous letters," he muttered. . . . "You remember . . . we were talking about them last week . . ."

Molly nodded. She remembered very well; she had been terrified by his violence.

"They were talking about them at lunch today . . ." His uneasy whisper tailed off uncertainly.

"I know," Molly told him calmly, "I was there." He looked at her again.

"Yes, of course you were, weren't you?" he muttered as though this were the first time he had realised it.

"Dai found one in his pocket . . . you heard him read it?"

"Yes. Peter Lamb had one too."

"Yes. Even old Peter. . . . You said that last week, didn't you, after you showed me yours . . . you said, 'I think it's a sort of excitement for people who write them, once they start, they can't stop' . . . you said, 'he's probably distributed masterpieces all over the hospital by now'."

Molly nodded; she was rather startled that Chris should have remembered her remark verbatim. Her mind went back to their conversation a week ago. . . .

Because he had wanted her to, she had unfolded the cheap typewritten slip of paper and handed it to him.

For a moment he had held it in his hand, his eyes carefully averted.

"Sure you don't mind if I read it?" he'd asked with a sort of guilty urgency. And she'd shaken her head.

'That was when I began to get frightened,' she realised now; Chris had stared stonily at the stupid scurrilous little note while a slow flush crept up over his face and then abruptly his moody ill-temper had blazed into a terrifying inferno of rage.

He had questioned and cross-questioned her, trying to find out if she knew who had sent it. But Molly didn't know. She didn't even want to know; woman-like she hadn't any inclination to take action. Her determination to leave it alone had added fuel to the fire and at last she had unwillingly given way; nagged on by Chris's restless temper they'd worked one by one through their friends and colleagues in the hospital looking for the culprit.

"No, I can't imagine him doing such a thing," Molly was saying for the twentieth time, when suddenly Chris had raised his head and stared at her, his eyes glittering.

"I believe I've got it," he said slowly, and his voice had made Molly shiver. For a moment those glittering eyes seemed to stare right through her, and then he'd abruptly shifted his focus and asked:

"What do you say to Everard Nicholson?" And Molly had taken breath to reply . . . and then paused.

The seconds went by and the breath she had taken to defend Everard Nicholson ebbed away in a slow sigh.

"You see?" Chris's voice was triumphant. "Even you don't say, 'Oh, I can't imagine him doing such a thing!' "

His half-conscious mimicry of her made Molly wince. In the summer Chris's 'take-offs' had kept the whole common room laughing. . . .

"Well," she'd answered at last, "I can see what you mean of course . . . but don't you think we're probably prejudiced because we don't like his inquisitions?" And to her surprise Chris had answered:

"Could be. He fits almost too well, doesn't he?"

And there they had left it. But in her heart Molly had wondered if perhaps Chris wasn't right. . . .

She came to realise that Chris was asking a question.

"You heard what Peter Lamb said about chasing up this swine through his typewriter?"

She nodded. "He's right, of course, but it would take some doing, wouldn't it?"

"I want to rule Nicholson out. There'll be no one in Admin. now, I'm going over there. Will you come with me?"

Molly looked at him. 'I can't let him down now,' she thought, and pushing away her sense of foreboding, she agreed.

Back in the familiar atmosphere of the hospital, she found it difficult to believe in the half-formulated fantasies they had conjured up, but she followed Chris obediently as they surreptitiously made their way to the quiet, dark office-block.

They switched on the light in Everard Nicholson's office and stood there listening and looking. Somewhere nearby a door closed quietly. Chris's hand flew up to the switch and flicked it off; their hearts thudded, a lorry rumbled by outside; if there were footsteps it was impossible to hear them.

At last Chris risked the light again.

"One of the cleaners leaving, I expect," he muttered under his breath.

They looked at the great desk behind which until this morning Everard Nicholson had sat in state. There was no typewriter there. Their feet moved across the thick carpet and were cautious on the bare boards of the adjoining rooms. There were two typewriters in the little anteroom that opened off Nicholson's state apartment, five in the big bare room beyond.

Chris shook his head. "I don't see him using those," he said.

They retraced their footsteps and looked round Nicholson's room again. Molly stood by rather helplessly as Chris began a methodical search.

Half an hour later and still empty-handed, he came to a stop, baffled by a cupboard in the panelled wall.

"It's locked," he said. He stood there looking at it and something in his still figure made Molly shiver. 'Which is the real Chris?' she wondered rather desperately, 'I thought I knew him, but I don't, I only love him.' And suddenly she had a picture of him sitting in his plane, an intent, still figure, vulnerable in the sky, a target for the searching fingers of light, and the screaming flack . . . it was a picture she knew, but had she ever pushed it to conclusion? Had she ever watched his face as he manoeuvred his own load of death over the point where it would do most harm? . . . Resolutely she pushed the thought away.

Chris looked up at her; he seemed quite detached, the moody, distraught man in the pub had vanished into no-man's-land.

"Stay here, Molly," he commanded casually. "I've got to fetch something—I'll be back directly."

"But, Chris . . ."

"Shan't be a second."

The silences weren't so bad; when it was quiet one would hear if someone came across those two empty adjoining rooms or down the corridor whence Chris had vanished. But through each sudden clamour of traffic she strained her ears in vain. What should she say if someone found her here? Was there anywhere to hide? How would she know whether it was Chris or someone else coming back?

'What was that?' She spun round. The door to the adjoining room was very slowly and quite silently closing. She stood transfixed, waiting for the final click as the lock went home. Whoever was there was holding it, the knob had stopped turning but as she stared at it, it shook. Keeping her eyes upon it she tiptoed backwards towards the light . . . there . . . it was out. There was a moment's absolute silence, then the lock clicked home and a bar of light appeared under the door.

She managed to scream before a hand clamped down over her mouth.

Then there was light again and Chris was cursing. She got her story out, but there was no light under the door now, no one in the adjoining rooms.

Chris was quite calm again. "I shouldn't have left you alone," he said, "you've been imagining things. Why should there be anyone here at this time of night?"

"Why should *we* be here?" the girl retorted with spirit.

"There's that," he admitted. He frowned at her thoughtfully and suddenly; even through her anxiety, Molly recognised the Chris she knew. He was in command of himself—and of her.

"You know it was wrong of me to let you get mixed up in this," he remarked. "I'm going to send you back. I shan't be long."

Molly protested, but in vain. Chris escorted her down the corridor and through the heavy door of Admin. into the main hospital.

"You've got a ward round at ten," he reminded her. "I'll see you after that."

He raised his hand in a half salute; the door clicked to and Molly found herself alone.

Chapter Seven

It was very quiet on the wards. Molly was grateful to be working—when she was on duty her own anxieties faded into the background so that sometimes for a few minutes she almost wondered if they were real at all.

She prepared a syringe of morphia for room ten, and braced herself to go in. 'If only I couldn't remember her so clearly as she was,' she thought as she walked quietly to the bed. When Mrs. Turner first came to them, both she and they had known that the carcinoma in her stomach was inoperable; yet no one's problem had been too small for her to take an interest in, there seemed to be no situation in which she couldn't find, somewhere, an excuse to set them all laughing. Of course it was unreasonable and yet it had seemed that courage like that must be proof against all comers, that a spirit such as hers must somehow triumph, even in the face of the treacherous flesh.

Molly gently bared the wasted thigh, already pocked with needle-marks and drove the plunger home. There were no realities now but pain and morphia. The fancy suddenly came to Molly that Mrs. Turner, the Mrs. Turner she would never forget, stood beside her, comforting her in her task. She looked at the face on the pillow; already the morphia had begun its work of mercy. Molly stood there till the breathing grew blessedly quiet. Her strange sense of comfort persisted: 'She's here,' the girl thought, 'she'll always be here, even when this last fight with pain is done.'

She stood in the corridor blinking away the tears before quietly pushing open the door of No. 9. She only remembered as she found herself inside that this was Everard Nicholson's room and this evening's escapade in his office abruptly filled her mind. Suddenly she stiffened. Through the sigh of the silencer on the closing door, she had heard some other sound . . . a rustle had it been? An uncanny sense began to grow on her that someone was in the room watching her. . . . 'God, what's the matter with me tonight?' she wondered impatiently. The hissing seemed to grow into a roar as she tried to listen beyond it. 'I ought to catch that door and stop it,' she thought, but some nameless fear had frozen her into immobility.

It was shut. And suddenly everything seemed quite commonplace again. Molly looked at the patient on the bed; in the dim light it was difficult to focus at once, but she could hear him breathing, slowly and deeply. There was no other sound. 'I must be tired,' she thought as she approached him. He had come to but was asleep. His mouth was slackly open, showing pale gums; a dribble ran out of the corner on to his pillow.

She turned her attention to the intravenous drip. Since last month when she had got the cross-matching wrong on that accident case she couldn't look at a drip without a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach. But there was nothing wrong with this one. She left Everard Nicholson and continued on her round.

Little Charlotte Hallet was in the next room. Molly stood by the neat white bed for a moment, looking down at the pale face which in sleep seemed to show the wear of pain, at the thin arm on the coverlet. She thought of her own young sisters chubbily asleep, all three crowded together in the double bed, but looking as sleeping children should.

Her round finished, she stepped into the big lift that in the daytime was always busy, moving trolleys with their sick burdens from floor to floor, down to the X-ray department, or to radiotherapy, up to the theatre, back to the ward; she glanced at her watch, ten forty-five.

She was almost glad that Chris wasn't in the common room. She felt stretched and tired and the peace of her books seemed suddenly attractive. . . .

But no sooner had she settled at the big brown table than he came hurrying in. He smiled at her briefly and turned to Dai:

"Go and rout out Theatre Sister will you, Davies," he ordered. "Tell her to have number four theatre ready in twenty minutes. Sir Charles is bringing in a V.I.P. with a head injury and he's maniacal. I'm getting hold of Jonson and Rogers." He turned to Geoff. "You're in on this too," he said, "Sir C. wants all three of us to assist."

By two-thirty A.M. all was quiet again. The V.I.P. lay unconscious in bed, his head swathed in bandages. The consultants had gone again.

Geoff felt light-headed with tiredness. He'd left the theatre after the others and seemed to have missed the way to the lift. He walked on down an apparently endless corridor. There was no one about. 'I suppose I could go back and ask Night Sister,' he thought, but decided against it, he'd look such a fool . . . losing his way in his own hospital. He walked on.

Afterwards he often tried to remember just when he'd first heard the strange sound that finally brought him to a standstill. Tired as he was then, he had thought at first that it was no more than the ringing in his own ears.

It was really nothing more than obsessionalism that made him walk back along the corridor just to make sure. The sound stopped as he touched the door-handle of room nine.

Peering through the gloom and the mist of tiredness that enclosed him, he thought at first that he was dreaming what he saw. He walked slowly forward, and his scalp prickled with horror.

Everard Nicholson lay arched and grinning on the bed. Torn loose from the vein it had been feeding, the 'drip' silently and uselessly spilt blood on to his dead body.

Chapter Eight

What remained of Nicholson lay, naked and cold, on the high white table in the mortuary. Grouped round the opened skull were all those who yesterday had combined their skills in an effort to save his life and sanity. They watched in silence while Hamilton dissected out step by step the sites of yesterday's operation.

At last he straightened up and spoke to Sir Charles. "Nothing amiss there," he said. "A nice neat job and it's held. We'll have to see what else we can find."

Excavating the entire brain into a bowl, he continued his dissection. The others watched in silence.

"Well, there's nothing obvious," he said at last. "Of course," he added, "a seeping haemorrhage into the brain isn't necessarily visible to the naked eye. I'll take slides from all this, and if the damage is there we'll pick it up on the microscope."

"Judging from the angiogram we did yesterday," Rogers remarked, "I should say it's practically certain that occult bleeding had started before he was operated on. There was considerable vascular disturbance in the brain. That meningioma was a fair size, wasn't it? It had obviously reached the critical point at which the pressure inside the skull must rise and in doing so inevitably interfere with the circulation. Once that has happened the vicious circle it sets up makes seepage inescapable."

Peter Lamb's rather strident voice sounded above the general murmur of agreement.

"I expect I'm talking through my hat," he said belligerently. "I know the chap's just had a tumour removed and in the circumstances intra-cranial bleeding is obviously the most likely cause of death and fits in with the opisthotonos, and all the rest of it. But you know, I saw him last night just after Tremaine found him, and the first thing that entered my head for some absurd reason was that it was the opisthotonos of strychnine poisoning.

"All right, all right," he said rather irritably as several of the others began to object, "I said I was probably talking through my hat. But I had a case of strychnine poisoning once and it's the sort of appearance that sticks in the memory."

"Well, of course, strychnine does produce that picture," Hamilton remarked. "But isn't it a bit unlikely in the circumstances?"

Sir Charles Hallet stared at Lamb disdainfully.

"Don't be absurd, man. Look at what happened; he was in coma yesterday morning, we removed a meningioma in the afternoon. A haemorrhage producing the appearances you saw is an obvious risk. It's a straight sequence, why go looking for strychnine poisoning?"

"It's difficult to see how he could have taken it anyway," Rogers put in. "Strychnine acts very quickly. He must have died very soon after he came to; how on earth could he have imbibed strychnine in that time?"

Lamb suddenly laughed. "Yes, put like that it does sound a bit highly coloured," he admitted. "It was just that appearance. . . ." He frowned as if revisualising it. "Anyhow," he said suddenly, "it's very easily disposed of, isn't it? If we try some of his blood on a rat that'll be the end of it."

Sir Charles let out a "Phaugh!" and young Dai Davies turned an amused face to Molly Summers; he was thoroughly enjoying the altercation, but to his astonishment he found her staring, stiff and white-faced from one contestant to the other. He turned to Chris Harcourt on his other side, and Chris was in the same case. What the devil's the matter with them, he wondered. He looked around at the other faces; the new chap, Tremaine, was watching with interest, if he's been in practice he won't have seen a p.m. for a good while, Dai thought; Susan Faraday was frowning and looked older than she usually did. Hamilton was a bit bleak perhaps, but no more so than usual; Sir Charles was in a temper, but that wasn't unusual either; Rogers looked as he always did. But then it was difficult to tell with the older men. They must get used to putting up a front, I suppose, Dai thought, and his attention wandered as he tried to imagine himself doing the same thing. Jonson, the anaesthetist, had remained still and silent throughout the entire proceeding, but he never spoke unless it was essential to do so, and you couldn't read his face, those glasses of his caught the light so that one couldn't see his eyes. As for Peter Lamb, well, he was just being Peter Lamb, only a bit more so!

Hamilton smiled his rather frosty smile.

"Well, yes, I suppose we may as well do that since the point's been raised," he said. "But I fully expect to find evidence of brain damage when I examine the tissue under the microscope. However. . . . Perhaps you'd be kind enough to fetch me a rat, Dr. Faraday?"

The somewhat tense silence that followed was punctuated by bellicose mutters from Sir Charles. Susan Faraday returned, holding a cage. A rat crouched in it, its long, naked tail dropping through the bars, its small, bright eyes wary and suspicious. 'Funny how one forgets what big ears they have,' Geoff thought, 'and so thin—one can see through them. And what long, fierce feet.'

Hamilton peeled off his outer gloves and asked for a hypodermic. Bending over the remains of Nicholson he drew some blood from a vein in the neck. With the red syringe in his hand he walked over to the next p.m. slab.

"Bring me a cutting-table," he said to the mortuary attendant, and the man placed what looked like a wooden bed-table on the marble slab.

Cautiously Hamilton took the rat out of its cage. The others had left the corpse and followed him; he glanced at Peter Lamb:

"Can you hold him for me? No, get him under the neck, firmly, or he'll bite you. That's it."

With his left hand Hamilton picked up a pinch of skin on the light-furred belly.

"Just trim that fur back, will you?" he said to Susan, and rather flustered, she fetched a pair of scissors and obeyed.

Hamilton gently pushed the needle-point into the skin and immediately pressed the plunger home.

Nothing happened.

The tension had already begun to break among the little group of watchers when suddenly the back arched, the claws extended horribly and the lips drew back over the long, fierce teeth in a ghastly grin of impending death. Through the wrenched-back lips a long thin scream was mercilessly driven out. It went on and on.

And then suddenly it was over. One of the women gasped. Complete silence followed.

One person after another looked away from the dead creature, still frozen in its horrible spasm of death, and stared at Peter Lamb.

There was amazement and a hard, bright curiosity in his face as he stared from one to another of them.

"Well, I'll be jiggered," he said.

Hamilton gave him a humorless grin.

"Well, Lamb, it seems you were right."

"But it's fantastic!" exclaimed Harcourt.

Sir Charles dowsed him with a light-blue glare.

"We'll have to quit bleating, it's a fact," he stated baldly. He looked at Lamb without love.

"I thought you were treating us to a show of exhibitionism," he remarked. "Owe you an apology."

'Lamb's going to get fat on that,' thought Dai Davies irreverently, observing the senior surgeon's malevolent glare at his junior. 'Apologising isn't Sir Charles's strong suit.'

"Where do we go from here?" Rogers's deep voice broke the uncomfortable silence.

Hamilton looked round the circle of faces.

"That's certainly very much to the point," he answered grimly. "I don't need to tell any of you that that no longer depends upon us. As far as I am concerned, I shall stop now and report my findings to the Coroner. At that point, of course, the police will take over."

Chapter Nine

In his square, tidy room, overlooking the wide Thames and the busy embankment, Superintendent Grainger of the C.I.D. blinked thoughtfully through horn-rimmed spectacles at his newly opened file on the case of Everard Nicholson.

"Well, Mac," he remarked, smiling across the desk at his burly Scots sergeant, "this looks like new ground; they handed us one dead hospital administrator who, they say, had been growing peculiar of late; or perhaps," he qualified, blinking through his sandy lashes at the notes in front of him, "merely more peculiar. . . ." After a second or two of concentrated thought the highly educated voice continued: "On Monday morning early he was discovered on his office floor in coma. The same afternoon an eminent surgeon removed a tumour from his brain. He was found dead in his bed in the early hours of the following morning. Although apparently he was expected to survive the removal of the tumour, it was on the cards that he might not, so nobody was unduly surprised. However, for some reason unknown, a registrar (for your information a registrar in this context seems to mean a sort of incipient consultant), a registrar named Peter Lamb insisted that the possibility of strychnine poisoning should be investigated.

"So they tried out some of the dead man's blood on a rat which perished instantly, not to say unpleasantly, at which point they applied to us to elucidate their mystery."

"Shouldna be surprised if it'll tak' some elucidatin' too," Sergeant MacGregor responded.

"Mm," agreed Grainger, his forehead wrinkling in tram-lines above his horn-rimmed glasses. He was glancing back through the file.

"No one seems to say so, but somehow I shall be surprised if we find our dead administrator was held in affectionate esteem. There's a distinct note of reserve in these reports." He closed the file and got to his feet. "Well, the sooner we're there, the warmer the trail should be."

In his office at St. Justin's, Fothergill, the dean, awaited the arrival of the man from Scotland Yard. Like most of those who worked in the hospital, he found his own attitude to the murder of Everard Nicholson equivocal, to say the least of it. But he was curious too. High-ranking officers from the Criminal Investigation Department were out of his ken and he wondered what manner of man he would have to deal with.

He stood up to greet the tall, lean man with sandy hair and a scholar's stoop, and felt his official smile sliding off his face as a twenty-year-old memory battled its way to the surface. The door clicked shut as Fothergill's secretary left them alone together and the two men recovered from their momentary bewilderment and laughed at each other across the big desk.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the dean. "Old P.G."

"Featherhead to you," grinned Grainger.

"I'd have got it sooner," Fothergill remarked, "if it hadn't been for the gig-lamps."

Grainger was filling his pipe. "I had the advantage of you," he remarked. "Your fame was loftier than mine." He struck a match and sucked the flame into the bowl of tobacco. "The moment I saw you," he went on with an amused glance at the authoritarian figure behind the desk, "I had a vision of the flagstaff on the chapel, and fluttering in the May breeze . . ."

Fothergill groaned. "Not the headmaster's purple pyjamas!"

"The headmaster's purple pyjamas."

The dean raised his eyebrows with a schoolboy's exaggerated dismay, and Grainger laughed, his smoke-stained teeth gripping his pipe. He watched Fothergill's face slide back into middle age; it was a big, heavy face with a broad jaw and fierce, bushy eyebrows.

"Well, I suppose we must get down to our rather more heinous crime here at St. Justin's," he remarked.

"Yes."

The dean regarded his ex-schoolfellow thoughtfully.

"Damn it, I can't think of you as a sleuth," he said almost irritably; "weren't you after a classics degree when I last saw you?"

Grainger smiled apologetically.

"Oxford doesn't offer a course in detection," he remarked mildly.

"So you took your degree in philosophy and then clapped on a copper's helmet?"

Grainger nodded and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Hm." Fothergill put a cigarette between his lips and flicked his lighter on. He squinted at the little flame with hard concentration, his hairy brows drawn down tightly. He grinned suddenly as he glanced at the detective. "Puts me in a bit of a spot, it being you," he remarked. "I had my little piece all ready—you know, 'shocking affair—at a loss to understand it'. Not that that isn't quite true as far as it goes, but . . ." He waved a large, square hand.

Grainger nodded his comprehension. "Yes, I see your quandary." He blinked thoughtfully at the large, heavy-featured face behind the desk. "I think in practice it's more apparent than real, though. After all, the present position's as untenable for St. Justin's as it is for us, isn't it? The thing's happened and whatever may be relevant has got to come out sooner or later. If it's sooner rather than later it should be easier to limit the disturbance."

The dean inhaled thoughtfully.

"Relevancy seems to be the sticky issue," he remarked. Grainger laughed.

"We shall get on faster if we make that my pigeon," he returned. He puffed quietly at his pipe for a few moments. "You'll know in your job," he went on, "that in any search for facts you're going to bring up a lot of stuff you don't need. That's the way it is with us in the force. But once we've solved our little conundrum, whatever it may be, all that stuff drops back into limbo; it's a by-product—we're not interested in it."

"You always were a persuasive blighter," grumbled the dean. He grinned as he added, "All right, I know it makes sense. I suppose the idea of police investigation is bound to set up a shrinking reflex in the most law-abiding of us. And I suspect, you know, that it's just that cloud of irrelevant stuff that has to come out along the way that worries people most. Always excepting the fellow who's in it up to his neck, as you might say. Not that his neck's in jeopardy now, I gather, unless he wipes out one of your chaps. . . ."

"I don't think we'd better start on the law," said Grainger grinning.

"No. Time we got down to business, isn't it? After all this preamble I don't know that I've got that much to tell you anyway." He frowned as he lit another cigarette. "You'll need some sort of a picture of Everard Nicholson, won't you? Since we're being frank, suppose I disregard the Latin tag and proceed to speak ill of the dead . . . not that it's easy to say anything very specific about him. He was an intransigent doctor-loather—which had its inconveniences. . . . I don't think there's any sense in denying that we shall all be glad to be rid of him, though naturally we hardly welcome murder as a method . . . if it was murder, and I suppose it must have been." He frowned again.

"You say *we* shall all be glad to get rid of him—that would refer to the medical staff, would it?"

Fothergill smiled rather wryly. "I suppose I was thinking particularly of the medical committee, which means in effect the senior medical staff, but he was possibly even more unpopular with the juniors. . . . Actually we made any number of attempts to shift him, but though everyone loathed him we never succeeded in getting a unanimous vote in committee. . . ."

"Would you be willing to tell me which of your colleagues abstained on these occasions?"

Fothergill's hairy brows were heaped like a thicket above his Roman nose.

"No," he answered at last. "Sorry. I wouldn't feel justified in telling you that. Actually it probably wouldn't have got us far anyway; the powers that be aren't much influenced by medical committees, however unanimous. . . . Nicholson made so little attempt to win our co-operation that I rather assumed he must have friends at court. The trouble with doctors and administrators is that doctors are apt to be busy doctoring and most of them haven't time or inclination to cope with politics as well."

Grainger eyed his friend speculatively. "If I ask why most of you wanted to get rid of him, or what friends he might have had at court, I suppose you're going to shut up like a clam?"

Fothergill laughed. "Never were keen on generalities, were you?"

Grainger smiled back. "Don't mistake me," he said. "I'm very grateful for what you're giving me. This is a new world to me and I need the background before I can make any sense of what I may find."

"Yes, I can see that . . . must be an interesting job, yours." He leant back in his chair, tipping his head so that Grainger could see the undersurface of his chin, the slack taken up as though he were still young. 'He used to do that when he got stuck on a physics problem,' the detective remembered suddenly.

The dean's gaze left the ceiling and returned to Grainger. "About friends at court," he said, "I don't know that he *had*, you understand. I simply hazarded a guess. As for who they might have been I can't help you at all. If you let yourself get drawn into that sort of speculation, you might as well give up medicine." He reached for another cigarette.

"Now why did we want to get rid of him? It's difficult to explain that without boring you with technicalities. But I'll try to give you a general idea." He took a long draw at his cigarette and blew the smoke through his nostrils. "Nicholson was always very close with hospital funds; up to a point he was just doing his duty, of course, but he took it to extremes. Medicine is moving at such a rate these days that drugs and equipment are always getting out of date; with Everard in charge we frequently couldn't do our best for the patients because we hadn't the material aids . . . but that's only one example. There were battles over everything, food, sterilisers, repairs, administrative treatment of the junior staff. . . . I could go on *ad infinitum.* It's like having sand in a machine, the thing keeps breaking down at different points, but it's all due to the sand." He laughed. "Incidentally don't get away with the idea that all hospital administrators are like that. It would be a poor look-out for medicine if they were. Nicholson just happened to be a shocking example."

Grainger looked at his friend carefully.

"Nothing more personal?" he asked.

Fothergill's smile was suddenly urbane. "Shall we say that at this stage that's going beyond my brief?"

"Well, thanks for what you've given me." Grainger took out his notebook. "Just one or two points of detail now; first, who would be in the best position to tell me if anyone was seen going into Nicholson's room between ten-thirty P.M., when, according to Dr. Summers he was all right, until two-thirty when Tremaine found him dead?"

"You'll need the Night Sister for that floor, that would be Linnell. She'll tell you which nurses were on with her."

"She'd be asleep now?"

"Yes; she'll be on at eight tonight, though."

"Good. I'll see her then. Now, about getting hold of people for questioning, I don't want to disrupt the hospital work—how had I better set about it?"

"Yes. I expect you'd like the use of an office. You won't want an audience every time."

"It would be a convenience."

"Good, I'll see to that. About getting hold of people, your best course is to ring the switchboard, they'll trace anyone you want and you can discuss times with your victims individually."

Grainger grimaced and stood up. "Thanks," he said. Fothergill grinned as he pushed back his chair.

"Where will you start?" he asked.

"With the medical sequence if possible." The detective smiled wryly. "It's about as clear as mud to the laymen!"

The dean laughed.

"It's not exactly crystal clear to any of us," he remarked. He thought for a moment or two. "I think you'd do best to have a talk with Hamilton."

"Hamilton . . . oh yes, that's the fellow who did the frozen section and later the post-mortem, isn't it? He'd do very well. Where do I find him?"

"Path. Lab.; third floor of the main block and straight through the museum."

"The museum? . . . Good God, you don't keep your patients on display, do you?"

Fothergill grinned. "Only the bits we've taken out of them. Hamilton mounts all rare specimens in perspex—he's got rather a nice collection up there." He held out a hand. "Well, let me know if I can help at all, and good hunting!"

Chapter Ten

"You want to know what would have happened if Lamb hadn't suggested strychnine?" Hamilton crossed his long legs and puffed reflectively at his pipe. "Well, in the plain English you've requested"—he smiled faintly—"I think on my findings the Coroner would have signed it up as a post-operative death."

Grainger nodded.

"From my point of view," the pathologist continued, "it would have depended on the microscopic appearance of the brain tissue; to the naked eye there was no evidence of undue haemorrhage, but there could very easily have been occult bleeding—a sort of seeping haemorrhage within the tissues. . . ."

"As a result of the operation?" Grainger inquired.

"Possibly, but not necessarily. That lump in his head was big, you see. There wasn't room for it. If you put up the pressure in the skull sufficiently there is always a risk of haemorrhage."

"I see. And it wouldn't have surprised you if he had died as a result of that?"

"No. A cerebral catastrophe is by no means always gross to the naked eye. I expected to find confirmatory evidence in the slides."

"And did you?"

"No, because we didn't section it. As soon as we found evidence of strychnine it wasn't relevant, nor was the case in my province. I stopped the p.m."

"I see." For a moment the two men smoked their pipes in silence. The drone of Hamilton's voice came like a ghostly echo through the closed door, interspersed with the chatter of a typewriter. His secretary was taking reports off the tape. Hamilton was looking out of the window; Grainger glanced thoughtfully at a lean aquiline profile and fine, sandy hair lying meekly on a long, obstinate skull. Among the papers and telephones on the desk behind the pathologist was a small, framed photograph of a woman; the detective was mildly surprised, this fellow had a bachelor air.

"Have you any theories about how the strychnine was given?" he asked.

Hamilton turned round. "No," he said; "none."

"You didn't, for instance, find any injection marks?"

"There were injection marks, of course. Rogers had injected contrast medium for his angiogram and Jonson had used the usual pre-anaesthetic injection. There were no others."

Grainger's sandy lashes blinked thoughtfully under his horn-rimmed glasses. "Would you be able to tell if a second injection had been given on the site of a previous one?" he asked.

Hamilton seemed amused. "It's an ingenious idea," he said. "Yes, that's perfectly feasible and, no, I wouldn't be able to tell."

"How quickly would the poison take effect?"

"If it were injected into a vein?"

"Yes."

"Almost at once."

"And if it were taken by mouth?"

"Usually about twenty minutes, but in some forms it could take up to three hours."

"Mm. Thank you. . . . Now about this frozen section; I understand that if the tumour had not been—benign is the term, isn't it?—Mr. Nicholson would not have been expected to live long?"

"That is correct."

"What was the response in the theatre when you came in with your news?"

Hamilton's fine, arched brows rose a trifle. "Sir Charles went on with the op," he answered.

Grainger blinked. "Quite so," he remarked mildly. "That wasn't quite what I was getting at. In the case of a man as unpopular as Nicholson the news that he could be expected to recover must have had some impact, however slight, on those who were present?"

Hamilton's frosty-blue eyes seemed to look through the detective rather than at him. "At the lunch-table, in the common room, yes," he answered. "In the theatre Nicholson wasn't Nicholson; he was the patient. What any of us may have thought of him as Nicholson wasn't relevant."

"And what did you think of him as Nicholson?" Grainger asked, changing his ground.

Hamilton's shrug was economical; he took his pipe out of his mouth. "I saw very little of him," he answered. "I never bother with the Admin. people unless I want something for the lab. and they won't give it to me. They usually gave me what I wanted so I didn't come across them much. Except by letter, of course," he added.

"You found him co-operative, in fact?"

"I suppose you could put it that way. I got what I wanted which was more than most people did, I believe. I didn't take to him personally. . . ."

"Why was that?"

Hamilton grimaced. "No particular reason. He just wasn't likable. Some people aren't."

"What sort of a man was he in your opinion? Can you give me any impression of him?"

Hamilton considered; his lean face was intellectual and relaxed . . . too relaxed? Grainger's glance lowered to the long hand coiled about the warm bowl of his pipe. Those gripping fingers were too tight for that casual face.

"Well, I suppose you know why you want to ask me . . . as I've said I didn't have much occasion to meet him. But for what it's worth he always struck me as clever and probably a bully."

"A bully? What made you think that?"

Hamilton smiled. "Like you, I've heard people talking about him," he remarked. "But I'd have suspected it anyway. It was in his personality."

"Mm. To return again to this frozen section . . . how many people would have known about your report? I mean, how widely would it have been known that Nicholson wasn't going to die of a brain tumour?"

Hamilton had a sudden memory of Susan Faraday's voice as she asked, 'Was it malignant?' He sucked thoughtfully at his pipe. "You'll have a job to get a satisfactory answer to that question," he said. "It really depends on the efficacy of the hospital grape-vine. I'd say it probably got round pretty quickly."

"Did you tell anyone yourself? Apart from those present in the theatre at the time?"

"No," Hamilton answered.

Grainger turned over a sheet in his notebook.

"Well, I think that's all for the moment, Dr. Hamilton, except for a brief account of where you were between"—he hesitated a moment—"I think we'll say eight o'clock and two-thirty A.M. last night?"

Hamilton gave him a rather quizzical glance. "Alibis, of course. This is quite an experience." He looked thoughtfully at his hands. "Would you like my finger-prints?"

Grainger smiled a little. "Dabs, as we call that department, will be round to collect them soon," he returned equably.

"Hmm, I'll think twice before committing my next murder," the pathologist remarked. "Now, last night . . . eight o'clock . . . he was an unconscionable time a'dying, wasn't he? But that's your affair. Eight o'clock; I was here. At about half past I went round to the Goat and Compasses for something to eat and I was back here again by, I suppose, about nine-fifteen. I left at eleven-thirty and went straight home."

Grainger's forehead creased in tram-lines above his glasses. "You work very long hours, Dr. Hamilton," he remarked.

The other man laughed. "Oh, this isn't hospital work. I've got an investigation on. Research to you," he added, seeing the detective's puzzled face. "I've no family and frequently stay on here until midnight."

"I see. Were you alone?"

"Yes. There'd have been someone on duty in the clinical lab. doing emergency blood work and so on. But I didn't go across."

"Would they have seen you drive off?"

"I doubt it."

"Did you see a porter perhaps?"

"No. There are the cleaners, of course. They find me rather a nuisance I understand . . . but they go off about nine."

"Mm. You say you went straight home at eleven-thirty —where do you live, Dr. Hamilton?"

The pathologist dug out a card.

"You have a housekeeper, I expect?"

"I have. But she's away."

"You didn't meet anyone who knew you?"

"Nobody."

"And what did you do when you got home?"

"I went to bed. I had a bath, if that helps." Hamilton grinned sardonically.

Grainger laughed. "It might if you overflowed it and anyone noticed," he remarked.

"I don't overflow it," the pathologist answered didactically.

"Well, that doesn't help us then." Grainger made an entry in his notebook and stood up. "Thank you, Dr. Hamilton. I can't think of anything else to ask you now . . . maybe I'll be back later."

"Thanks," the pathologist returned dryly. He got to his feet and, smiling with remote affability, escorted the detective to the door.

Like Geoff Tremaine before him, Grainger was waylaid by the attenuated Bennett while on his way to Nicholson's office. The sub. admin. officer scuttled out of his lair like a nervous crayfish and barred the way with pallid tentacles. Grainger's official card produced the Open Sesame, however, and the detective walked in over the thick grey carpet and greeted his sergeant.

"Well, Mac, how're we going?" he asked.

The big Scot bunched his lips and shook his brindled head.

"Plenty to look at, of course, but I wouldna say it's verra much help to us, not so far. Have ye the fella's private keys maybe? There's a locked cupboard here"—he pointed to the panelled wall behind the desk—"and none o' these'll fit it"—he indicated the big bunch of office keys on the desk.

Grainger took a box out of his pocket. "Has Dabs been in here yet?" he inquired.

"Aye, they've been round everything they could get at, including the staff."

"Anyone object?"

"Only a thin, weedy-lookin' fella, Bennett I think they called him."

Grainger laughed. "Met him in the corridor, he wouldn't let me in. So he didn't like it, eh? I don't think we can make anything of that, occupational obstructionism, wouldn't you say? Where's Dabs now?"

"In the office next door. The Admin. papers are filed there."

"Good, we'll have him in." He opened the box as he spoke. "Keys aren't exactly rewarding, but there's a plastic tab on these. I think it might be worth trying before we handle them."

Dabs was young, thin, dark and spectacled. He tackled the keys with infectious enthusiasm.

"There's a finger and thumb on this tab that don't fit the dead man," he reported triumphantly, and added with regret a few minutes later, "Can't make much of the rest, I'm afraid."

"Good fellow," remarked Grainger absently. "Even that's more than we had a right to hope for. Carry on next door, will you, and we'll call you again if we find anything."

He examined the cupboard on the wall and selected a key; the door swung open and the two detectives peered inside. It wasn't very large; there were bottles of drink, wineglasses and tumblers and an old portable typewriter.

"Wonder why he kept that in there?" muttered Grainger. He leaned farther into the cupboard. "It's been put back in a hurry," he went on. "Whoever did that must have knocked that bottle over"—he pointed to a prone bottle of whisky.

Mac clucked distressfully. "Yon's guid spirit an' that stopper's leakin', it's in crooked." Grainger twisted his head round to grin at his sergeant.

"Cheer up, Mac, we'll be able to stand it up again in a moment or two. Just crane your neck for a moment, will you, and look round the back here." Grainger unthreaded himself from the cupboard and stood upright.

"See anything?"

"Aye," came a muffled voice. "This is where he kept that little portable . . . you can pick oot the marks in the dust."

"I think we'll have Dabs back again," remarked Grainger as the sergeant's head and shoulders reappeared. "I'm curious about this."

The white powder picked out a stampede of finger-prints on the little black case of the portable.

Grainger smiled at the young man as he straightened up.

"They're the same, aren't they?" he asked. "Those two superimposed thumb-prints?"

Dabs was scintillating with enthusiasm: "That's right, sir, that's dead right." He took a photograph and turned the little machine over. "We should be able to find that forefinger again this side." He was like a schoolboy eyeing a midnight feast—the two older men exchanged an amused glance.

"I suppose these others are Nicholson's?" Grainger inquired, when the forefingers had been identified.

"Most of them, sir. But not all. There are others. Quite a gold-mine this little machine, sir. I wonder what we shall find inside?" He carried the machine to Nicholson's desk and began studying the keys. For a short while there was a concentrated silence. Grainger walked smiling to the desk as the young detective began to chirrup again.

"I must show you this, sir, look!" He pointed to the top line of keys and extended his finger in a curve to include the fractions on the right of the machine. "All these have the dead man's prints *only*. And they show that he was accustomed to typing. . . ." He fluttered his fingers over the keys to illustrate the correct fingering for touch-typing. "But *these*, on the other hand"—he picked out all the vowels and the more commonly used consonants—"these have several superimposed prints and they are *all* made, every one of them, with the first and second fingers, that is, of course, by persons who have *not* learnt to touch-type!"

"Hm," said Grainger thoughtfully. "That certainly is intriguing. You say several superimposed prints . . . is it possible to tell how many?"

The young man leaned urgently over the machine. At last he shook his head regretfully. "I shall have to study the photographs, sir. At a guess I'd say two or three, but you do understand, sir," he emphasised, peering up at the Superintendent, "that that's just a guess."

"I quite understand," Grainger reassured him, smiling a little. "Are they so superimposed that it'll be impossible to identify them, do you think?"

"I've been wondering about that, sir. . . . I should think these top ones should be identifiable, wouldn't you? I'm not very hopeful about the others, I'm afraid, sir."

When the young man had gone Grainger said:

"Fix up for the office staff to come in here one by one, will you, Mac? We'll have to find out who knew of the existence of that portable. Not that they'll tell us if they did, but we may as well ask them."

But everyone looked at it with sheep's eyes and denied any knowledge of it.

When this exercise was over Grainger turned to Mac again:

"You turned up nothing in here before I came in that isn't related to hospital administration?" he asked.

Mac shook his head. "Mind ye," he remarked, "I'd say from what I've seen that the fella was at loggerheads with the staff on a number of Admin. issues. . . ."

"But in this country we don't usually poison officials with whom we happen to be at loggerheads, quite. No, there has to be something more personal behind this somewhere." He picked up the portable. "I think, Mac, we're going to leave St. Justin's to stew in its own juice for a few hours and turn our attention to Nicholson's house; and we'll take this with us," he added, looking thoughtfully from the massive desk with its silver inkwell and polished brass ruler to the shabby black case of the little portable. "I've a hunch it may have more to tell us."

Chapter Eleven

It was a smart little street where, until yesterday, Everard Nicholson had lived; demure, early-Victorian houses, small and plain enough to be popular today and decked with fashionable artifice. In summer, Grainger thought, the street would be garnished with potted plants, geraniums and fuschias on the balconies and trees in tubs by the front door; now it was hibernating bleakly in the early darkness of a December afternoon. The children were coming home from school, exuberant, round-faced little people bouncing along beside the high perambulators, chatting with their chic young mothers about the day at school behind, the Father Christmas just ahead.

The police car crawled; under his bushy brows Sergeant MacGregor's small, bright blue eyes were scanning the house-numbers.

"Reckon it must be that shabby one, down there on the right," he said. He put out an arm and the car moved slowly across the road.

Beyond the shabby house a buttercup front door swung inwards, a child ran in and an inconsequential contemporary wallpaper sprang to life in the sudden flood of light. A slim-legged young mother, her shining hair blowing in the east wind, eased the big pram through the small doorway and the yellow door swung cheerfully shut.

Paul Grainger didn't notice for a moment that the car had stopped outside Nicholson's house. He was remembering his wife; she had been expecting their first child when a flying bomb had killed her in 1944. . . . He thought of his quiet flat, the silence of homecoming, his orderly morning departure. . . . Becoming suddenly aware of MacGregor's questioning glance, his lips smiled and he said, "So this is it, is it, Mac?" Behind his horn-rimmed glasses his glance wandered over the peeling paint, the dingy curtains.

"Not quite up to the others, is it?" He opened the car door and heaved his long, lean form out of the passenger's seat.

Homes are personal things; even after all these years Grainger remained aware that he was turning a dead man's door-key and stepping into another man's province. It was warm and still out of the wind, but the narrow hall smelt stale and lifeless. Somehow it didn't seem strange that Nicholson was dead; Grainger dismissed an absurd fancy that the man whose murder he was investigating had actually been dead for years.

A little man was coming up the basement stairs that dipped away into darkness at the far end of the hall; he stopped on the top step, a dwarfish fellow staring at the two detectives with little, brown, aggressive eyes, like a rat.

"Can we have some light?" Grainger asked casually. "I am the Superintendent from the C.I.D. and this is my sergeant." He displayed his card.

The little man had shuffled nearer to reach the light-switch. He clicked it on and stared at the police card with a sort of fascinated horror. He said nothing but looked up to Grainger's face.

"How long have you been with Mr. Nicholson?"

"Seven years, sir." He was a cockney. The Superintendent stared at him thoughtfully.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The wizened little fellow peered up at him suspiciously as if unwilling to part with this much information.

"Braown, sir," he contributed at last, and added a servile attempt at a smile.

"Brown, eh." Grainger was silent for a moment. Then:

"Well, Mr. Brown," he continued more briskly, "can you tell us anything about this business?"

The little man blinked up at him; he seemed more at his ease now. "You mean Mr. Nicholson's—er—sudden demise, sir?"

Grainger's lips twitched. "Yes, Mr. Brown, you could put it that way."

"Naow, sir. 'Fride I don't know nuffink abart that. Mr. Nicholson, 'e weren't wot you'd call a communicative gentleman, sir."

"I see. Well, we'll have a look round and call you if we want you. Have you any keys we shall need?"

"Naow, sir. Mr. N. wos very perticlar abart keys, sir. 'E niver give me no keys 'cept fer the back and front doors as you met say, sir."

The dead man's bedroom was bleakly comfortable; Grainger prowled round it restlessly.

"Don't recognise that fellow's face, d'you, Mac? I'll swear he's been 'in' sometime."

The sergeant was investigating the pockets of a thick dun-coloured dressing-gown. He turned round with a crumpled sheet of carbon in his hand.

"Hold on to that," Grainger said. "We'll look at it downstairs."

Mac was frowning, his big brindled head tipped back as he searched his memory.

"I canna say as it comes to mind. But I think maybe your memory for faces is stronger than mine."

A dressing-room as bleak as the bedroom, but tailor-made suits in the wardrobe, fine linen, silver-backed brushes. Mac picked one of them up; it was embossed with a monogram in elaborate Gothic initials.

"Never could make sense of this kind o' script," he grumbled. "Looks more like a K than an N, doesn't it?"

Grainger glanced at it. "Yes, it does . . . there's a V there too. . . . E.V.? . . ." He shook his head.

A strictly functional bathroom; Brown's crowded little attic; piles of cheap magazines, blood and thunder, the Wild West, pin-ups, a small radio, well-worn shoes, a battered photo of a soldier's grave in France, and a darkening print of a plump-faced woman and a thin-faced boy taken on a pier somewhere in the long-ago world between the wars.

"Dad, Mum and Master Brown as was," Grainger said, and they went next door into the lumber-room.

A noisy cistern and gurgling pipes through the matchboard partition, an ancient cane garden chair, dark with dust, a child's desk, a woman's dressing-table, old-fashioned and rather graceful, inlaid wood and a tipping, oval mirror, silvery with age. It stood by the small deepset window, almost as though it were still in use. Lining paper in the drawers, brown-spotted with age, a faint smell of lavender, nothing else.

Dusty luggage piled in a corner, some broken. Grainger pulled out a big, old-fashioned school trunk. He frowned at it. "Mac?"

The sergeant came over.

"Look at those initials."

Mac stared at the trunk; just visible on the leather between the wooden braces, inscribed in chipped black paint were the initials E.V.K.

"Thought it was a K," the sergeant said. The two detectives exchanged a speculative glance.

"Well, it's time we were getting downstairs," Grainger remarked.

Nicholson's study was more obviously lived-in than the rest of his house. Mac pulled the threadbare curtains and switched on the lights. A certain spurious cosiness manifested itself. The room had been furnished with an eye to creature comfort and a sort of dour avoidance of bad taste. It was a small room and rather crowded.

MacGregor laid his crumpled sheet of carbon on the desk and began patiently smoothing it out. Grainger leaned lazily against the door lighting his pipe. Between puffs his light-lashed blue eyes moved round the room with concentrated speculation. The sergeant let out a grunt of surprise and his chief glanced across at him and was momentarily startled to find himself staring at his own reflection.

"The mirror above that desk commands the door," he remarked. "Nicholson must have hung it there on purpose."

The sergeant looked up and met Grainger's eyes in the glass.

"Aye, that's right enough." He picked up the creased blue sheet and stared at the reflection, frowning.

"If this is the sort o' thing he was writin' I canna say I'm surprised he needed to tak' precautions. . . . Not that I can make a great deal o' sense o' 't . . . we'll have to get the photographic people to play aboot with it, they'll bring oot more than I can and I'll be verra interested to see what it is. It's a letter written apparently to Sir Charles—is'na that the fella who did his operation for him? It's no business letter and still less a friendly one . . . just come and tak' a look at it.

"If only he'd used a fresh piece we could ha' got it oot," the sergeant went on unreasonably as his chief peered over his shoulder. "But look"—he pointed with a large forefinger—"ye can just pick oot Sir Charles here, and a wee bit farther doon, 'soho bastard', and then 'titled lady-friend'. Sakes, Sir Charles can't ha' had much love for Mr. Nicholson . . . especially if this stuff should turrn oot to be true." He twisted his head to look up at his chief.

"You remarked as there had to be somethin' more perrsonal."

"Yes, Mac, here we go." Grainger frowned rather grimly at the crumpled carbon. "We'll be lucky if that's an isolated example, I'm afraid." He wandered away and stared round the room again. On the opposite wall hung a fair-sized picture of Napoleon.

"He would choose Boney," he muttered; he peered at the edges of the picture. "Flush on the wall too," he added. His fingers explored the heavy ornate frame, and suddenly the picture swung open like a door, revealing a large safe in the wall. A combination lock. Grainger grinned at his sergeant.

"Your pigeon, Mac, I can't cope with that."

The big Scot came over with alacrity; he had rather a penchant for opening safes.

Grainger moved to the dead man's bookshelves and blinked over them with leisurely curiosity. Reference books on finance and company law, *Who's Who,* textbooks on law, statistics, mathematics; not many books for reading in the ordinary sense, though a few volumes of verse looked as if they'd been well-handled at some time. He sat down at the desk, unlocked it with Nicholson's keys and began pulling out drawers. Headed writing paper, bills, receipts, income-tax papers and business letters. A stack of rather cheap typing paper, carbons, spare ribbons. He took out one of the little round tins, opened up the portable and tried the spool. It fitted. He pulled out the next drawer. It was half full of leather-bound books; he took them out and laid them along the top of the desk. . . .

"Hmmm. . . . It seems our corpse was the happy possessor of troops of friends, Mac," he remarked. "How many address books d'you think he has here?"

Mac grunted interrogatively; he was heavily engaged with the safe.

"No less than thirteen." Grainger opened them out and began to study them.

"I wonder if he's indexed this lot somewhere?" he muttered some time later. "Some of these names have combinations of letters against them. . . ."

"Dinna talk to me aboot combinations," growled Mac. . . . "Ach, there she goes!" The thick safe door swung silently open.

"Good work, Mac." Grainger had jumped up. "Lord, it's enormous!"

"Aye, must ha' put him back a pretty penny to have this installed."

"Which suggests it was worth his while. This fellow didn't throw his money about if the state of the house is anything to go by."

Mac felt inside for a light and switched it on.

"Sakes, it's packed! We shall be here all night."

"Mm. We——"

A discreet knock sounded on the door.

"Can you open this thing again if I shut it now?" murmured Grainger to his sergeant.

"Aye."

The Superintendent returned to Nicholson's desk.

"See what he wants, Mac."

Mac opened the door and found Brown standing there with a tray of tea and sandwiches.

Grainger repressed a smile as the big Scot turned to him for guidance. They'd had no lunch and Mac was hungry.

"Thank you, Brown," he told the manservant. "That's very welcome."

The sergeant stepped back into the room and the little man walked in with his tray, his beady eyes ranging the room greedily. Hastily recalling himself to deference as he approached Grainger, he set the tray down on a table and switched on the fire. As he straightened up the detective saw his glance fix on the thirteen address books that were ranged along the top of the desk.

"Ever seen those before?" he asked quietly. Brown started.

"Naow, sir, can't say as I 'ave."

"Well, thanks for the tea. We'll put the tray outside when we've finished."

But Brown didn't seem to want to go.

"I wos jist making myself a cuppa in the kitchen, you see, sir, and then I thought to meself, I thinks, even the law must git up a thirst in pursoot of dooty as you met say, so I——"

"Brought us some tea," Grainger finished for him. "Quite so. That will be all for now, thank you."

"Ackcherly there was jist one other little thing. It's buried in the past as you met say, sir, ever so long ago it was, jist a young fellow I was then, sir. . . ."

"Yes," prompted Grainger as Brown showed signs of seizing up.

"Well, as I wos saying, sir, it were years and years ago, sir."

"We've gathered that a vast distance of time separates you from your misdemeanor. What was it, housebreaking?"

"Ach, so yer did knoaw, sir. I thought as 'ow Mr. Nicholson met a made a note of it somewhere. Very business like 'e were with 'is notes and sich. I don't knoaw wot 'e wrote daown, sir, but it were only a first degree 'ousebreakin' as you met say, sir. No violence, nuthin' like that. We didn't do that in those days, sir," he remarked with a certain conscious pride. "The only thing wos, sir, I did p'raps rather anticipate my release, sir, if yer gits my meaning, sir."

"You broke jail, did you?"

"Well, in a manner of speakin', sir. But I wouldn't niver do it ag'in, sir. Broke me Mum's 'eart, it did. Fourteen years I bin on the straight and narrer, sir. . . ."

"And seven of those with Mr. Nicholson. Did you ever come across him before you came to work for him?"

"Naow, sir."

"Then how did he come to be acquainted with this bit of history?"

"Strike me if I knoaw, sir. Yer could 'a' knocked me daown with a fevver wen 'e come up with it."

"Ah, weel," remarked Mac happily, when the little man had gone. "I canna say but Mr. Brown's conscience has its points," and he poured out two cups of tea.

For a few minutes the two men drank thirstily while the December wind howled beyond the windows.

"We shall need something large to unload that safe on to," Grainger said then. "Bring over that gate-leg, Mac, and set it up here. We can start work while we're eating."

"Difficult to know where to begin, isn't it?" he remarked a few minutes later when the safe stood open again. "I think perhaps a sample from each shelf to give us a general idea."

He picked a thick file from the bottom shelf and began to look through it. After a few moments he grunted and carried it over to the table. Pouring himself another cup of tea he began to read.

Mac was frowning rather unhappily over columns of figures; he snapped the book shut, rammed it under his arm and reached up to the top shelf. It was stacked with dark wooden boxes and he slid one out and carried it over to the table. From the heavily carved top, the many-armed Siva gazed up at him with complacent sloe-eyes. The big Scot stared down at his painted gaze with an air of slightly offended bewilderment.

Grainger glanced up and looked with amused curiosity from his sergeant's face to the box on the table.

"Good Lord, Mac, that's rather interesting." He studied the Hindu god thoughtfully for a few moments and fell to examining the sides of the box. "Another nice little puzzle for you, Mac. No keyhole, you see." He glanced up at the dark boxes stacked end-on along the top shelf of the open safe. "Are they all like this?"

Mac returned with another couple and laid them beside the first. The elephant-faced Ganesh and the snake-headed Naga looked out at the two detectives with ancient unconcern.

"Really most interesting." Grainger was quite animated. "Wonder what he kept inside them?" he added almost casually.

"Aye, and how did he get it in there?" rumbled the Scot, his big fingers gingerly exploring the densely carved woodwork.

"Don't pretend you're not enjoying it, Mac," Grainger grinned at him. "There must be all of twenty up there, quite a nice little job of work for you and refreshments to boot! What's in that book by the way?"

"Accounts; there's a whole shelf of 'em."

"Hm. And not for general consumption, since he kept them in his safe. . . . I thought we'd run into those sooner or later. I've a feeling we're going to earn our bread and butter over this case, Mac. It was an odd blighter this, and nobody's fool."

"And no one's sweetheart, either, so I've gathered," the sergeant remarked, pouring a cup of the dead man's tea down his throat.

"He didn't exactly love his fellow men," Grainger agreed. "This stuff in here"—he tapped the file—"reads like the notebook of a thoroughly uncharitable recording angel. It's a meticulous record of defamatory material. Petty stuff, most of it, but the sort of thing that would arouse fear and antagonism . . . your letter to Sir Charles is here by the way."

"Sounds as if he asked for trouble," remarked Mac indistinctly; his mouth was full of sandwich, his fingers busy with the still unopened box.

"Mm. Difficulty is, he asked so many." Grainger turned the pages of the file. "Take the people who were concerned with his operation; besides Sir Charles, I've found notes on Jonson, the anaesthetist; Rogers, the radiologist; Harcourt, the assistant surgeon; Faraday, who cross-matched the blood for his drip; and Summers, who on the evidence so far, is the last person to have seen him alive. Among the doctors that only leaves Hamilton who did the frozen section (incidentally I suppose if that tumour had been cancerous and not benign he'd be rather dubiously alive at this moment) and the two young assistants, Davies and Tremaine, both of them more or less newcomers I gather."

"Fate must ha' had her tongue in her cheek, handing him over to that lot," chuckled the sergeant.

"That's what I thought. But looking through this infamous tome, I rather doubt it; I shouldn't be surprised if half the hospital was after his blood. Heaven knows how the fellow ever got any work done. Collecting all this information, if it is information and not imagination, must have kept him busy enough. And why on earth did he want to do it, I wonder? . . . Ah!"

Siva had suddenly yielded up his secrets; the long box was stacked with neat, orderly piles of ten-pound notes.

"Hm, that's obliging of him," Grainger remarked, peering at them. "We'll have the numbers of those, Mac."

"A thousand pounds," remarked the Scot with vicarious satisfaction some twenty minutes later. He tucked the last tenner into place with affectionate fingers and drew the next box towards him.

"Ye dinna find yoursel' thinkin' in terms o' blackmail?" he inquired of his chief as he stared thoughtfully at the elephant-headed one. His fingers began to move delicately over the lid.

"If it was blackmail, it was unusually profitable," returned Grainger, laughing a little. He leant back in his chair and began refilling his pipe. "I think doctors would be dangerous to handle, too," he remarked. "They're trained to back their own judgement in the face of Chance, aren't they? If one of them had rounded on him and told him where he got off, he'd have been up a gum-tree." He struck a match and puffed reflectively. "No, I'm inclined to think Nicholson found a fatter corpse to feed on. As senior admin. officer of a place like this, he must have had the handling of sums that would seem astronomical to you and me. A brilliant swindler might get away with a small fortune before anyone tumbled to it . . . maybe that's where this file comes in; suppose he wanted to frighten people off inquiring into his own pursuits . . . a reputation for being a dangerous customer to deal with would have been very handy if he was embezzling hospital funds."

"Aye, 'twould add up. But they might still ha' turned on him, surely?"

"They might indeed, Mac. Maybe one of them did. Mind you, a dealer in innuendoes isn't at risk in the same way as a blackmailer who has demanded money for silence. . . . Ah, another thousand, eh! Are they all going to be banknotes I wonder? There were some income-tax returns in his desk, he had quite a decent salary and no dependants. I suppose we shouldn't look askance at a reasonable nestegg! But I'd like to know what those account books are doing in his safe."

He picked up the one Mac had left on the table and frowned over it while the sergeant listed the numbers of the second box of banknotes.

"Accounts aren't much in my line," Grainger muttered. "But I think the hospital would be well advised to get in an independent auditor." He pushed the book away. "Meanwhile we shall have to grill the night staff on who might have had access to the fellow . . . they're going to love us, time we've finished with them. Thank God doctors don't usually go in for murdering their patients—everything's laid on for the job—means, opportunity, everything!"

"Aye, that's right enough."

"Oh, well"—Grainger glanced at his watch—"the night staff are on duty now. You carry on here, Mac. I'll be back when I'm through."

Chapter Twelve

Grainger climbed out of his car and blinked up at row above row of yellow lights shining out on the December night; inside the big hospital, walking down the long corridors, he found himself enveloped in an even antiseptic-smelling warmth. All around him, reassuring in their crisp blue and white, purposive but unassuming, the night nurses were settling their sick charges for one more hospital night. Beyond his fatigue and the narrow beam of professional curiosity, the detective felt the impact of a new world settling upon him; Everard Nicholson, even the mysteriously dead, horrifically grinning Nicholson who would be put in the earth tomorrow, seemed curiously dwarfed by this world of immediate realities.

He located the private wing and walked quietly down the corridor past the numbered doors and the vases of carnations and chrysanthemums turfed out for the night, a tall, lean man carrying another world with him, a man with a scholar's eyes and a scholar's stoop, but also and always a hunter, a man given over to justice.

Night Sister was short and plump and not so young; she had a back like a poker and brown eyes that had seen a thing or two but still knew how to twinkle. She watched Grainger's face as he asked his questions, her short, solid body tilted back as though it were made in one piece.

"Hmm, quite a tall order," she remarked crisply. "Not so bad later on, there aren't so many of us about then. But eight o'clock is difficult, the day staff are still here and we're busy taking over. And then there are the visitors."

Grainger raised his chin and blinked once or twice as the bright overhead light struck his glasses.

"Did you see the patient yourself last night at any time, Sister?" he asked.

"Nicholson, you mean? Yes, of course I saw him. At nine o'clock. Nothing amiss then."

"In that case I think we'll take it from nine."

"That's certainly easier," Sister remarked approvingly. "Last night we'd a good few post-ops to keep an eye on, but we were reasonably quiet until Sir Charles brought in his head injury . . . that was much later though." She tilted back again and eyed Grainger straight. "You want the names of anyone who was in this corridor, whether they had any business here or not, from nine o'clock until two-thirty?"

Grainger met her shrewd glance with a faint smile.

"Quite right."

"Very well." Sister bent her head in thought and two parallel chins appeared above the collar of her dress.

"Well, looking at it from your point of view, I think I should state first that it would probably have been perfectly possible for anyone who wished to avoid being seen to have penetrated into Mr. Nicholson's room." She glanced up at Grainger as she added dryly: "We don't normally anticipate any necessity to protect our patients from being murdered."

"Naturally."

"Good. I felt I should make that clear. I take it you will be questioning the four nurses who were on duty on this floor. They are here tonight, of course. I did not myself see any unauthorised person here last night. Dr. Faraday came up at nine-thirty to change the bottle on Mr. Nicholson's drip, and Dr. Summers was up here on her round from ten-twenty until ten forty-five. She visited Mr. Nicholson too, of course. He had come to by then but was asleep. Mr. Harcourt was up here shortly after Dr. Summers left. He didn't mention what had brought him."

"Were you surprised to see him up here?"

"No. Sir Charles has several patients on this floor. Mr. Harcourt looks after them at night unless there is anything urgent enough to require a senior surgeon."

"Did you see him entering a patient's room?"

"No, I was in my office and only noticed that he passed by. He seemed to be in a hurry and I didn't speak to him."

Grainger made a note. "And after that?" he asked.

"Mr. Harcourt rang me about a quarter of an hour later; he wanted a room ready for the head injury who was coming in. We had a good few of them by after that, on their way to number one theatre. . . . Sister Grahame was the first, she had a pro with her, Parker I think it was. Mr. Harcourt, Mr. Davies and Sir Charles's new registrar—er—Mr. Tremaine followed soon after, and then Dr. Rogers and Dr. Jonson and last of all Sir Charles." She frowned suddenly. "You know I *have* forgotten something," she said, a note of surprise in her voice. "I spoke to Mr. Lamb shortly before eleven. He had an emergency appendix, a tricky one, she'd perforated, poor child; and Mr. Lamb was still here at two-fifteen because I asked him if he could get me some special sedative for little Charlotte Hallet. She'd had a nightmare and I couldn't get her off again."

Grainger looked up from his notebook. "Did you see the others returning from number one theatre?" he asked.

He saw the nurse's plump forehead wrinkling under her sparse eyebrows as she struggled for recollection.

"Well, now that you mention it, I don't believe I did," she said slowly. "Except Sister Grahame, of course, she came down with the patient just before two. After that I was busy getting him into bed."

"This is the head injury Sir Charles had just operated on?"

"Yes. He's a Cabinet Minister and was injured in a car crash, I expect you know."

"Did you see anyone after that?"

"No. Only Mr. Lamb, as I told you. And later Mr. Tremaine."

"What time was that?"

"At two-thirty."

"Did you return to your office after settling the patient?"

"No, as I came out into the corridor one of my nurses asked me if I could help her with Charlotte; the child was very much upset."

"Were you aware of footsteps going down the corridor when you were attending to either of these patients?"

The plump, decisive face became perturbed. "I'd rather not answer that, if you don't mind. I suppose I must have been since only Mr. Tremaine came by later, but I was attending to my patients at the time and my memory of possible sounds outside is too confused to be useful."

"I quite understand, Sister, that's a very proper attitude. Knowledge after the event too easily colours most people's evidence." He smiled. "And now I wonder if I could have a word with your nurses; I shall need to see them one at a time."

But disappointingly little came of these interviews. Five of the patients on the floor had been operated on that day and a patient on the medical side was on the dangerously ill list. They had been too busy to pay much attention to who had been passing by, though two of them had noticed Sir Charles turning the corner of the corridor towards the lift at about two o'clock, and one of them had seen Dai Davies, but she couldn't fix the time.

Grainger frowned over his notes as the big lift rattled downwards; he pushed open the tall, metal gates and made his way to the doctors' common room. The phone rang as he arrived and he stood there blinking mildly at the young men and women in white coats while someone delivered short incomprehensible phrases into the black mouthpiece.

A young man with close-cropped black hair glanced up from his books and stared at the detective with sudden attention. He pushed back his chair and came over.

"Can I help you at all, sir . . . my name's Tremaine, by the way."

"Tremaine . . . then you were assisting yesterday at Nicholson's operation?"

"I was." Geoff laughed ruefully. "It was my first op. here, too. I only arrived yesterday morning and walked straight into the Nicholson business. I found him in coma on the floor of his office!"

"Did you, then! Hm. I'm rather interested in that op." He considered the young man speculatively. "Did it cause a lot of excitement?"

Geoff frowned. "Well, I suppose it did in a way . . . being one of the staff and all that, you know . . . and of course we all thought they must have brought in the wrong man. He was quite unrecognisable without his toupée and his specs and all that, you know."

"Most confusing," agreed Grainger, his quickened interest carefully ironed out of his voice.

"And then the frozen section and all that, you know, and that anaesthetic emergency just after we heard it was benign. . . ."

"Had trouble with the anaesthetic, did they?"

"Only for a few minutes. Jonson soon got him going again. It was a beautiful job altogether; Sir Charles is an incredible surgeon to watch. Pity someone had to mess it up after all that."

'All that' seemed to be one of Tremaine's phrases.

Grainger asked him:

"You didn't know Mr. Nicholson yourself?"

"No. Never met him conscious. Only clapped eyes on him three times, first time he was in coma, second time he had his head open while Sir Charles fished his tumour out and the third time he'd just vanished through the pearly gates."

"You heard him as you walked down the corridor, didn't you?"

"I heard something. I suppose it must have been him. But when I opened the door he was dead."

"Was anyone else in the corridor when you heard him?"

"Not a soul. I was the last one down; I think Night Sister was in her office when I passed."

"She didn't hear anything?"

"No. She wouldn't up that end. It wasn't a loud noise. I only heard it because I was near."

"Was Nicholson a popular administrator?" asked Grainger rather abruptly.

"I think I'm a bit too new to help you there, sir."

"Or a bit too loyal, perhaps?"

The young man flushed. "Why not ask the others, sir?"

But the others were wary, and to shake them out of it with Nicholson's notes, Grainger needed to see them alone. He decided to let them ripen until tomorrow, and drove back to Plumton Street to see what more Mac had found.

The sergeant was grey and bushy with fatigue, but there was an exultant look on his face as he drew his chief into the hot, stale little room and relocked the door. He waved a silent hand at the table and watched Grainger's eyes widen as they fell on an open boxful of shining gems.

"Are they genuine, sir, d'ye reckon?"

The stone between Grainger's forefinger and thumb flashed green fire and the drab room seemed to fade.

"That needs an expert, Mac; but I'd say they are, wouldn't you?"

Serried ranks of carven boxes covered the table; the sergeant's thick fingers moved delicately over the Hindu gods and lid after lid sprang silently open. The banknotes were neatly stacked, like playing cards.

"Umm." Grainger was silent for quite a while.

"Anything else, Mac?" he asked at last.

Mac's tired, heavy stride took him back to the safe; he handed his chief a stiff cardboard tube; it was a foot or so long and about an inch in diameter.

"Degrees," murmured Grainger, throwing his sergeant a rather puzzled glance.

He inserted two fingers in the top of the tube and drew out several sheets of crackling parchment embossed with coloured seals. He frowned over them thoughtfully.

"Scholarships all the way," he remarked as though to himself . . . "and a first at Oxford . . . he read law. At least—yes, Mac, rather belatedly I see what you mean." He sheafed through the stiff sheets again. . . .

Mac held out a long, crumpled form. "This wee document was tucked in the top o' that roll."

Grainger took it.

The document told him that forty-three years before a baby boy had been born to Felicity Maud Von König, wife of Nicholaus Von König, schoolmaster, of The Laurels, Brading, Sussex. The baby's name was Eric Nicholaus.

"Always the ghostly E.V.K." Grainger laid the papers down carefully beside the gems and felt in his pocket for his pipe. "One has an uncomfortable sense of being afloat on this case. . . ." He bent his head as he struck a match.

"Aye," the sergeant nodded with tired vigour. "After I'd got those boxes open I took a look at the other stuff. . . . I reckon if this fella'd set oot to have every man's hand against him, he could hardly ha' done better . . . and he'd too much money, much too much money. There're reams of accounts that're too clever for me . . . and on top of all that he's either changed his name or——"

"Or had some association with a man whose name is curiously reminiscent of his own," Grainger finished for him. He smoked in silence for a moment. "Bearing in mind that people choosing pseudonyms very rarely make a clean break with their own names, I'd say the former interpretation is the more likely. But if that's right why—and when—did he change it?" He stared fixedly at the threadbare curtains, thinking it out. It was late; outside, a last car slid down the road and stopped. The slam of metal—one door and then another; a girl's laugh and a man's reciprocating, lower, indistinct. Wood on wood, muffled, heavier—the front door. And then what? Scented soap in the bathroom, freshness of mint on soft lips . . . silky skin under the softly falling folds of nylon. . . .

"Any war record?" Grainger asked abruptly.

"No." Mac glanced at his chief. "I was looking for that. There was nothing."

"Von König," the Superintendent said. "Wonder if he was naturalised."

"Nothing about that, either."

The street was silent now; in the hot little room the gas-fire quietly licked oxygen out of the air.

"I was hoping ye might come back wi' a neat wee list o' those who'd opportunity to dispatch him," Mac remarked, glancing sideways at his chief.

Grainger turned round and smiled at the big sergeant. "Then you'll be charmed to hear, Mac, that virtually all the resident medical staff, amounting to some forty men and women, *and* all the consultants who were concerned with 'old Nick's op.' could probably have had access to the sick man's room between nine o'clock when Night Sister saw him and two-twenty when Tremaine found him. Among the nurses, that also applies to all the night staff. Not that anyone was seen going in, of course, except Faraday and Summers whose duty it was to do so. Harcourt was seen nearby just after Summers' round, which might add up to something, I suppose. But until we've some idea how Nicholson was poisoned or why, it's not a great deal of help. I gather he should have died pretty quickly, and Tremaine thinks he must have died just before he was discovered at two-twenty."

"Would all those folk ha' known his tumour wasna' goin' to kill him?"

"Hamilton says probably."

The sergeant grimaced and made a Scotch noise in his throat. He rubbed his face in his hands and stared rather morosely at the money-laden table.

"Och, there's somethin' I've no shown ye," he said suddenly. He stumped over to the safe and returned carrying a small old-fashioned notebook.

Grainger opened it and a photograph fell out. He stooped for it; she was a dark, slim girl dressed in the forgotten fashions of the nineteen-thirties. It was a face you'd remember, he thought, and his forehead creased in criss-cross lines, for it seemed to him that he did remember it. But nothing came to light that brought the girl to life in his mind. He stared fixedly at the little grey rectangle of paper and a pair of humorous eyes gazed back at him, humorous but with a latent hint of melancholy behind their sparkle. Her lips curved gently and were kind; the heavy, outdated frame of hair, the weight of years back to her time, hadn't extinguished the beauty of her face. Flesh and flowers fade, but beauty retains a tenuous immortality in the face of time and decay. . . . Paul Grainger frowned and recalled his thoughts to more pragmatic channels.

There was nothing on the back of the photo; he put it down gently and began to study the notebook. A curious expression came over his face as he slowly turned the small pages.

"Have you a specimen of Nicholson's writing?" he asked the sergeant.

"Hmm. It's altered quite amazingly, but I'd say it's the same hand." Grainger smiled tiredly at his fellow detective. "They're not very good poems, but his heart was in them . . . seems this fellow was human, once upon a time, as the fairy stories say."

Chapter Thirteen

Fothergill had given the detectives a little square office, white-walled and smelling of the hospital. Grainger sat behind the blank desk, his notebook open before him, his eyes on the tall young man in the white coat. It was the first time he'd seen Chris Harcourt. He's older than the others, the detective noted, and pretty hot and bothered about something, though he doesn't intend to be communicative.

Some visual memory was teasing the detective as his sleepy-looking eyes smiled at the young surgeon and suddenly he laid hold of it. That war-time poster on the corrugated-iron walls of the N.A.A.F.I. hut, on the hoardings by the railway station . . . a tall, curly-headed youngster in his Mae West, the popular image had been near enough the truth to drive the caption home: CARELESS TALK MAY COST HIS LIFE! Chris Harcourt had survived the war, he wasn't a hero any more; the frank youth was as lost as the boys who'd died then, but back in the days of the many and the few, that's how he would have looked.

"Sit down, won't you," the detective remarked easily. "I won't keep you long."

The young man limped quickly to the only other chair and sat down jerkily. He thrust his hands in his pockets and stared belligerently across the desk.

"Dunno what I can say to help you," he remarked. "We're all pretty foxed about this business."

"That's my headache," Grainger answered, smiling a little. He looked down at his notebook and allowed the pause to develop for a few minutes.

Chris faced him as stiffly as if he were a one-man firing squad.

Grainger deliberately turned a page and flattened it down. With his pencil poised he looked up through his glasses:

"How long have you been at St. Justin's?" he asked. Chris regarded him rather blankly and frowned as if he couldn't remember.

"Oh—er—rather more than two years."

"You knew Everard Nicholson before you came here?"

"No!" The startled denial sounded genuine. "I didn't know of his existence until I came across him here."

The nostalgia in his voice sounded genuine too.

"I gather you didn't take to him?"

Harcourt grimaced. "I don't think any of us did."

'He's rehearsed that bit,' Grainger thought. But it seemed likely to be a fair enough statement, nevertheless.

"Why was that?"

"Oh, I dunno. He had a bit of a God complex, you know. I suppose juniors like us tend to be iconoclastic."

It was a good answer; it seemed rather bad luck, really, that his defense was so useless. Grainger kept on studying his book; he turned back several pages and heard the young man breathing unevenly.

He looked up. "What was your father's name?" he asked.

Something had happened to Harcourt's face; his lips moved stiffly.

"Harcourt, of course," he said.

The two men stared at each other in silence. Chris's blue eyes were dull and hard; he didn't look like the boy on the poster any more.

"What was his job?"

Harcourt swallowed. "I dunno. He . . . he died just after I was born. My mother never talked about him."

"Why was that d'you think?"

"It's pretty natural, isn't it?" The chords in Chris's neck were tight with swallowed hysteria.

"In the circumstances, yes." There was an echo of apology in Grainger's quiet voice.

"So you know?" The ex-airman looked as bleak as the rubble of a wrecked town. He must often have faced death with less despair, Grainger thought. He tried to put himself in the other's place; how would it feel to learn that one's father had been a murderer? Would one feel the taint where it stung, in one's own blood?

"How long have *you* known?" he asked.

"Three months." The words were slurred.

'A shock, of course,' Grainger thought, 'but why should it strike him as so final and catastrophic? It's got in amongst him in a way I can't altogether follow.'

"How did it happen?" he asked aloud.

"I don't know. . . . I wasn't there . . ." As though he couldn't help himself he said, "It was a woman. . . . He"—a faint groan escaped him—"he must have been insane."

The detective had taken his empty pipe out of his mouth and was looking at it absently:

"I meant, how did you learn about this?"

"I had a letter. . . ."

"From whom?"

Chris's eyes met his with a sort of stupid cunning.

"It was anonymous," he said.

"But you knew who it was from?"

"Hadn't a clue."

"I think your best chance is to be frank with me, Mr. Harcourt."

"I told you, I haven't a clue."

"Hadn't or haven't?"

"Is this a grammar lesson? Hadn't, haven't, what's it matter? It's the same thing, I don't know who the swine was."

"Was?"

Chris stared at him inimicably. "I haven't heard from him for some time."

"What made you believe this letter?"

"I didn't. I thought it was some poisonous-minded idiot's idea of a joke. I used to be fond of a joke myself, but not that sort. I reckoned some damn-fool sally of mine must have misfired and made someone sore with me."

"But later you changed your mind?"

Chris was silent for a bit; he was cooler now and using his head.

"I suppose the first one shook me more than I reckoned at the time. . . . I got a bit neuro about it . . . began to wonder if I'd had some damn silly reason for picking bombers in 'forty-three . . . that sort of thing. . . . Then I had another letter. This time I decided to check up and have done with it." His crooked smile had died a long way back. "Wished I hadn't, then."

Grainger lit his pipe with leisurely deliberation; he asked casually:

"Did you kill Nicholson?"

"No. . . . Why should I?"

The detective turned over some more pages in his notebook.

"Do you consider you had an opportunity to do so?"

"I expect so. Most of us had, I should think."

"How do you suggest it was done?"

"Haven't a clue."

"Well, I think that's all for the moment; except for an account of your movements from nine o'clock last night until two-thirty A.M."

"Nine o'clock? I wasn't here."

"Where were you?"

"Round at the Hand in Hand, having a roll and a drink."

"Alone?"

The hesitation was so slight that Grainger wasn't sure it had been there.

"No. Miss Summers was with me. We usually pop round there on a Monday night."

"And then?"

"We came back here, 'fraid I'm not sure of the time but it was before ten."

"What did you do then?"

"I went up to my room and made up my notes for the day."

"Miss Summers wasn't with you?"

"No, she had a ward round at ten."

"I see. And after that?"

"Sir Charles came through on the phone just before eleven. He wanted the theatre ready for a head injury. Can't give you much of a timetable after that, I'm afraid, we were all buzzing about getting things organised. Sir Charles started the op. at eleven-thirty, if that helps."

"And what time did you leave the theatre?"

"I don't think I noticed, but it must have been shortly after two."

"Did you come down alone?"

"Yes, I held the lift gate for Dr. Rogers, but he told me to go ahead. He'd left something, he said."

"Did you see anyone in the corridor where Nicholson's room was?"

"Not a soul."

"Did you hear any sound from his room?"

"No."

"I see." Grainger glanced up from his notebook. "There's just one small point you haven't elucidated; you were seen in the corridor near Nicholson's room at ten-fifty. According to your account you were in your own room at this time."

Chris frowned vigorously. "Ten-fifty . . . Oh yes, sorry. I'd forgotten that. There was something I wanted to ask Miss Summers; I thought I'd catch her at the end of her round. But she'd gone."

"I see. Did you manage to catch her later?"

"Yes, in the common room."

The tentative knock on the door behind him made Harcourt jump; he disguised it rather well by springing to his feet, his game leg dragging.

"Shall I open it?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

Grainger stared thoughtfully at the young man's back; the moment of silence had been too long. Harcourt turned round:

"This is my colleague Dr. Summers, in case you haven't met. I'll be on my way, shall I?"

"That will be quite in order, Mr. Harcourt, if you can just let me take your finger-prints before you go."

Out of the corner of his eye Grainger noticed the girl's frightened glance at Chris's outstretched hands. He took hers as well, but she didn't seem nervous on her own account. He noted that she wasn't wearing an engagement ring.

She answered his first questions easily and economically. She had been at St. Justin's nearly a year; she had never met Nicholson previously; no, she hadn't liked him, he asked too many personal questions, but she hadn't had much to do with him.

"I have to ask you whether you have received any anonymous letters since joining the staff here?"

"Yes," Molly answered quite calmly, "I have." He smiled a little as he met her eyes.

"Perhaps you would also tell me what it was about? Or perhaps there was more than one?"

"No, I've only had one . . . it was nothing very much really." She raised her chin as she explained: "The writer thought I was rather a common person to be working in St. Justin's; it's true, actually." Molly challenged the detective with a sort of dignified naïveté, "People like you can hear it in my voice, can't you? I'm not educated, really, it's just scholarships that got me here."

"Scholars are usually regarded as the aristocrats of our educational system." Grainger's smile was gentle. "Was there anything else in the letter?" he added.

"Only that I ought to go back to the sink where I belonged."

Grainger's mouth was grim as he knocked out his pipe. "I see. Have you any idea who sent this letter?"

"No."

The answer was too pat.

"Dr. Summers?"

She looked up at him.

"Suppose I suggest to you that it was Nicholson? What would you answer?"

She frowned uneasily. "I don't know."

"Would it surprise you?"

"Perhaps not. But I haven't any right to say that. I don't know who wrote it."

"I see." Grainger turned a page of his notebook.

"Where were you at nine o'clock on the night Mr. Nicholson was killed?"

Her face didn't change, but he sensed her wariness.

"I was out with Chris—Mr. Harcourt, I mean," she corrected herself.

"I see. And at nine o'clock you and Mr. Harcourt were where?"

"We went to a pub and had some supper."

"Which pub?"

"The Hand in Hand; it's in Lostock Road."

"What time did you leave?"

"I'm afraid I didn't notice."

Grainger's eyebrows went up a little. "Were you off duty?"

"Until ten o'clock."

"You were due back on duty at ten and yet you didn't notice the time?"

A faint flush crept over the pale face. "I was leaving it to Chris; he knew I had a ward round at ten."

"Perhaps you can tell me where you went when you left the Hand in Hand?"

"We came back here."

"And what did you do then?"

"I started my round."

"So it was ten o'clock when you got back?"

"Yes."

"And where did Mr. Harcourt go?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him until later."

"What time was that?"

"I'm not sure . . . about eleven, I think."

"At what time did you go into Mr. Nicholson's room?"

"It would have been about ten-forty."

"How did you find him?"

"He'd come to but was very deeply asleep."

"What did you do?"

"I checked his drip and came out again."

"Was there a glass by his bedside?"

She looked surprised. "There could have been, but I didn't notice it."

"You can't say whether it was empty or full?"

"I think I should have noticed if there was anything in it," she said, frowning. "If you drink when you're coming round from an anaesthetic, it makes you sick, so we keep them empty until later."

"How do you imagine the strychnine was administered?"

"I just can't think. It seems crazy."

According to her evidence she'd studied in the common room after this until twelve o'clock, when she went to bed. Grainger let her go.

Ten minutes later Peter Lamb bustled into the room in response to a call from the switchboard.

"So you're the chap in charge of our little mystery, are you?" After Molly's soft hesitance his powerful voice seemed to shake the room.

"How do you like it?" he bellowed on, staring interestedly at the quiet detective.

Grainger returned the stare, his head tipped back a little. "I think I might like it a lot better if you told me what it was that made you suggest strychnine," he returned.

"Nothing easier. But it won't help you, I'm afraid. I just thought it looked like it."

"Isn't it rather odd that it didn't occur to the others?"

"I expect it did, but they'd have dismissed it. After all, why the devil should it have been strychnine? Any cerebral catastrophe could have produced that appearance; Sir Charles had fished a tumour the size of a tangerine out of his cranium less than twelve hours before—by all the laws of chance it ought to have been a post-operative death."

"And yet you suggested strychnine?"

Lamb grimaced. "Yep, I did, didn't I? As things have turned out you won't believe me if I say it was just a shot in the dark. . . . I didn't expect it to be strychnine. You could have knocked me down when that poor bloody rat began to screech. . . . I suspect I was just being awkward, really, always did have a constitutional inability to admit that two plus two necessarily equals four. There was nothing more to it than that."

Grainger blinked at him thoughtfully.

"Did you go into the p.m. room by arrangement?"

"No, I found I had time and I was curious, so I looked in."

"In fact one could say that you were there by chance?"

Lamb bunched his lips and stared at the detective with his bright brown eyes.

"Nobody could have reckoned that I *wouldn't* be there," he answered.

Grainger stared back at him. "All right, Mr. Lamb; we'll move on to another point. How was the strychnine given?"

"In the blood, of course."

"By injection you mean?"

"That, or via the transfusion."

Grainger's face was still; he was cursing himself for his own obtuseness.

"How would that be done?"

Lamb began to roll himself a cigarette; his monkey's face was quiet and clever. The detective watched him as his quick mind worked out some private game of consequences. His beautifully delicate hands placed the little wrinkled tube between his lips and lit it.

"Well, that's anyone's guess, isn't it?" he went on as though there had been no pause. "But the possibilities are obvious. It was either in one of the bottles, or else it was fed directly into the tube; or somebody shoved it straight into his hide with a hypodermic. I can't see anyone, not even the chap who wiped out Nicholson, keeping a bottle of poisoned blood among the spares in the fridge: so it looks as if it was done in the room."

"In the room, yes. Were you in Mr. Nicholson's room yourself at any time that night, Mr. Lamb?"

Lamb's dark eyebrows rose ironically. "The biter bit, eh? No, as it happens, I wasn't."

"Where were you in fact between nine and two-thirty?"

"I went home at seven-thirty. . . ."

"Where do you live?"

"In a fly-blown maisonette a stone's throw from here, but not near enough to lob strychnine into Nick's blood bottle," the registrar returned with a sardonic grin. "I didn't come near this place again until ten-fifty when I came in to do an emergency appendix."

"Were you near Nicholson's room at any time?"

"I passed it on my way to the theatre. . . ."

"See anyone?"

"Only Night Sister and that pretty little nurse with ginger hair, forgotten her name."

"And later?"

"Night Sister broached me, all weary as I was, would I prescribe a special sedative for Charlotte Hallet, she'd had a nightmare and needed to get to sleep. So I had to trot down to the dispensary and unlock it. . . ."

"The dispensary is kept locked at night?"

"Correct."

"Who have keys?"

"Oh, all the medical staff."

"Did you see anyone down there?"

"Nope."

"About 5 grains of strychnine were recovered from Nicholson's body; would it be possible to show that that quantity was missing from the dispensary?"

Lamb wrinkled up his face as he thought; he shook his head.

"No, I doubt it."

"What was the time when Sister asked you for the sedative?"

"Oh . . . somewhere between two and two-fifteen I'd say."

"And how long did it take you to fetch it from the dispensary?"

"About seven or eight minutes, I suppose."

"Was anyone else present when Sister asked you to go to the dispensary?"

"I rather think there was an orderly with a trolley farther down the corridor."

"And when you returned?"

"There was no one. I took it in to Sister and then trotted off home."

"Hmm. I haven't asked you what you thought of Nicholson."

"Well, he didn't exactly excite love, you know . . . bit of a Gestapo type. I've met Germans like him, now I come to think of it."

Grainger blinked at him thoughtfully.

"Ever come across him before you came here? How long have you been at St. Justin's, by the way?"

"Nope. And I've been here six years."

"There've been some anonymous letters around—have you had any?"

"Yep. Got it here if you'd like it." He dug the folded slip of typing paper out of his inside pocket and handed it over.

Grainger read it through; his eyebrows raised a little.

"What did you do about this?"

"Nothing."

"Any ideas about who sent it?"

"If I have, they're not for publication."

"There was a copy of this in a file in Nicholson's safe together with some names and dates."

"Mmhm." Lamb's lips were bunched again.

"Surprise you?"

"Not really."

"Why?"

Lamb grimaced lazily. "Dunno . . . fits in. Fellow loathed medicine men." He grinned. "Strange as it may seem, there are people who don't see us as a bunch of ministering angels!"

"You're suggesting he only did it to annoy?"

Lamb stared at the detective hard for a few seconds.

"I think he'd have enjoyed twisting our tails," he said then.

"You think others were favoured with his attentions?" Lamb's lips twisted irreverently. "Seems improbable mine was the only *billet doux* in his safe," he remarked; and with this, Grainger had to be content. He had, after all, learnt quite a lot from Lamb.

Chapter Fourteen

Susan Faraday was nervous, but giving quite a good imitation of brisk efficiency.

"You want me to show you how to give a blood transfusion?"

"Including every smallest detail, however unimportant it may seem to you. And you will pitch it at my level, won't you?" Grainger added smiling: "Pretend I'm a particularly dim-witted student who's got to do the job himself an hour from now!"

Susan laughed. "God forbid!" she murmured piously.

"Well," she began, "the initial step is to take a sample of the patient's blood and cross-match it to see which group he'll need for his transfusion. Do you want me to show you how to do that?" she asked, opening a case full of hypodermics.

Grainger grinned as he moved his arm away. "I think we'll assume I've learnt that bit," he amended.

Susan smiled. "Good. Then we know his blood group and we have several bottles of blood in readiness. . . ."

"Where?"

Her forehead wrinkled. "They didn't give an infusion during the operation, did they? . . . There'd have been a bottle in the theatre, though, in case of need. The others would be in the fridge nearest to his room."

Grainger stood up. "Can you take me there now?"

"Yes," answered Susan, a little startled, "of course."

They walked together down the busy corridors where the smell of lunch had begun to compete with the familiar antiseptic, and rattled upwards in the big lift to the private wing on the fourth floor.

Some fifteen feet away from Nicholson's room, on the opposite side of the corridor, Susan Faraday opened the door of a storeroom and showed Grainger an outsize fridge. She opened it up and the detective gazed thoughtfully at the ranked bottles of blood and plasma.

"I suppose this will have been cleaned since Monday night?" he asked.

"Well, yes. . . . Sister could tell you more about that than I can . . . but I would expect it to be cleaned at least once a day."

"Mm." He smiled wryly. "I don't think I like hospital murders, there's too much hygiene crossing the trail."

He closed the fridge and, walking over to the door, looked across the corridor at room nine.

"Can you tell me how many bottles of blood were given to Nicholson?" he asked.

"Yes, I gave them to him myself. One just after his op. and the second at nine-thirty."

"Who put the bottles in the fridge?"

"I did."

"Were they labelled with his name, or just with his blood group? . . . I notice you have both systems in there."

"With his name. And his group of course—as you see we use different-coloured labels for the various groups."

"Hmm. Well, I think we can go on with your demonstration now."

"Yes. I'll just have a word with Sister, we might be able to do it up here."

She was back in a couple of minutes carrying a tall, steel contraption with splayed feet and a bent top with a hook at the end of it. In her other hand were an empty blood bottle and a length of rubber tubing.

"Sister Craig kept Nicholson's room empty in case any query came up," she told the detective, "so we can do it in there."

The high, wheeled bed-table stood at the foot of the neat, flat bed, straight-backed chairs camped rigidly against the primrose walls, and the mirror on the dressing-table reflected a bare bedside locker and an empty armchair beneath a curtained square of December sky. Neither Death nor Nicholson had left any imprint here; the clean little room was waiting for the needs of another patient, for hope and love and flowers.

"Now—" Susan set up the tall, steel carrier beside the bed, she picked up the empty bottle and hooked it into position, the long rubber tube hanging down from its mouth, attached to one of the glass tubes that pierced the stopper. "You set it up so, and regulate it like this. . . ." She turned the thumbscrew and compressed the rubber pipe. Pointing to a glass bauble farther down the tube, she said: "When the bottle's full, you check the rate of drip in this little inspection chamber."

"I see. . . . I suppose this is the outlet for air?" Grainger asked, fingering the second glass tube that pierced the cork and rose high inside the suspended bottle.

"That's quite correct. We could do with a patient, couldn't we?" Susan said suddenly: "I'll see if anyone's got a moment to spare." And she vanished into the corridor.

Grainger examined the apparatus thoughtfully; if the poison hadn't been in the bottle, what then? To force it against gravity up through the air-valve seemed too difficult . . . perhaps it had been fed into the rubber tube through a fine needle. . . . Would the tube have leaked afterwards, he wondered.

Faraday came back with Dai Davies.

"Good morning, sir," the Welshman greeted him cheerfully, "we met in the common room last night. You're in need of a patient, I hear?"

"Thanks," answered Grainger, and the large young man bent down and unlaced a pair of battered brogues.

"I'm being instructed in the art of blood transfusion."

"Instruction and reconstruction, eh?" lilted the house-surgeon zestfully. He jumped on to the bed and arranged himself in a prone position. "I'll do my best to be Nicholson," he remarked, grinning cheerfully at Faraday, "but don't lose yourself in the part, Susan *bach,* it's an uncomfortable poison, strychnine is!" And he dropped his red head back on the pillow, closed his eyes and let his mouth drool open.

Susan smiled and picked up one huge, hairy wrist; she rolled up the starched white sleeve of his coat and the frayed cuff of a striped shirt and arranged the bared arm comfortably on a pillow with the open hand facing upwards. She wound a blood-pressure cuff round just above the elbow and pumped until the small veins in the soft-skinned hollow stood out a little. She picked up the rubber pipe suspended from the blood bottle; it was armed with a needle. She glanced up at Grainger.

"When I was doing this for Mr. Nicholson I fed the transfusion into this vein," she told him, "and the needle was strapped into position, so."

Grainger's gaze travelled thoughtfully from the suspended bottle, down the tube past the control screws and the inspection chamber to the needle strapped on the unpunctured arm.

"I see, yes. Thank you, Mr. Davies, you can return to life now," he remarked, and the young Welshman yawned and sat up.

"Just as I was getting nice and sleepy," he said and began rolling his sleeve down.

"Would it be awkward to try this out with water?" Grainger asked. He smiled as he turned to Dai. "It's all right, I don't need to feed it into you," he said, "a basin will do nicely."

"Yes, of course, if that's what you want," Susan answered a little doubtfully. "I'll lay it on now, shall I?"

"Thank you; I'll need a hypodermic too, full of red ink or something of that sort, and with a very fine needle."

When the drip was running into the basin on the bed, Grainger pointed to the exit valve.

"Just squirt the red ink up there, will you?"

Susan manoeuvred the needle past the cotton-wool filter in the projecting end of the glass tube and a brief scarlet fountain leapt upwards. A few drops splashed over the top and fell down into the water below.

"Hmm. Now can we load up with red ink again? Thank you. This time I want you to inject it at an oblique angle downwards through this rubber tube."

Susan drove the plunger home; the drips in the inspection chamber turned scarlet; in the basin below the fluid grew gradually pinker. She drew the needle out and Grainger stared at the spot where it had been.

"It won't leak if that was what you were wondering," Susan said. "I don't know if you were aware of it, but that's standard procedure; if we want to feed the patient something he needs, we don't inject him again but give it to him through his drip. You'll often see an anaesthetist doing it during an op."

Grainger looked at her. "No, I didn't know. So there'd be nothing significant about a puncture in one of these tubes?"

"No. Actually I doubt if you'd even see it with the naked eye. The needles are very fine and the rubber closes up again."

"Hmm. Well, that's all been most helpful." He eyed her thoughtfully. "I haven't given you any third degree yet, have I?"

In spite of his light tone, she stiffened.

"No."

"You've been at St. Justin's, how long?"

"Six months."

"Met Nicholson before you came here?"

"No."

"Like him?"

"No."

"Any reason for this?"

"No."

He smiled a little. "Doesn't strike you as a slightly unreasonable statement?"

She echoed his smile without much enthusiasm.

"Not really."

"You reckon to take unreasonable objections to people, do you?" He was still smiling, but she didn't respond.

"Occasionally."

"I have to ask you whether you've received any anonymous letters since you've been here?"

He watched her; she looked older, but that was all.

"No."

Grainger paused a moment. "Perhaps you would like to reconsider that answer, Dr. Faraday."

Her clean-featured face was cool and withdrawn, but there was a distant ring of panic in her voice as she asked:

"Why do you say that?"

Grainger stood his gold pencil on its head; he reversed it carefully and looked up at her.

"Nicholson had a private file in which your name appeared; also the carbon copy of a letter."

"Oh. . . ." It was a curiously helpless sigh; there seemed to be no fight left in her. "Yes," she said, "there was a letter." Her voice had turned drab.

"How did you know it was from Nicholson?"

"I didn't know."

"Then why did you deny receiving it?"

"I–I wanted to forget it. The facts were wrong anyway. . . ."

"About the transfusion?"

"Yes."

"Then why were you worried about it?"

She shrugged unhappily. "I wasn't."

"I believe you are a widow, Dr. Faraday?" he began quietly. . . .

She looked up, startled. "I am, as it happens, but I don't know how you knew. I only heard last week that Garth was dead."

"Please forgive me, I hadn't realised . . ."

"Oh, you needn't apologise . . . Garth and I have been separated for quite a while."

"You have a son, I believe?" Grainger went on gently after a moment.

"Yes, and we're both dependent on my job and, of course, I was scared about losing it . . . don't worry, I can see what you're getting at. But if you imagine that I killed Nicholson you're carrying your deductions too far!"

"I'm sorry if my questions upset you, Dr. Faraday, but Nicholson is dead and they have to be asked. You still maintain that you didn't know that Nicholson sent you that letter?"

"Yes, I mean, no, I didn't know."

"Very well. Now you will understand that I have to know where everyone was on the night Nicholson was killed, so can I have an account of your evening, please, beginning at, say, nine o'clock?"

"Well, yes, I hope so . . . if I can remember it all, I mean," Faraday answered confusedly. She rubbed a hand over her forehead and through her light brown hair. It was a capable-looking hand, but light and feminine, too. Grainger's eyes rested on the slender gold ring and he wondered what story lay behind it; Susan Faraday seemed to him full of contradictions, a difficult person to assess.

"I think I was in the common room from nine until I went up to attend to Nicholson's transfusion," she began. . . .

"It was then that you switched over to the fresh bottle, wasn't it?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Did anyone see you doing this?"

"No one was in the room with me, if that's what you mean. The night staff may have seen me carrying the bottle from the fridge to Nicholson's room, I suppose."

"How many bottles were cross-matched for Nicholson?"

"Three."

"And this was?"

"The second."

"So one still remained in the fridge?"

She frowned. "Yes, there should have been one left."

"You don't remember seeing it there?"

"I think I saw it . . . I can't be quite certain. I was expecting it to be there. I didn't think about it at the time."

"Assuming it was there, what would have happened to it by now?"

"Oh, they'd remove Nicholson's label and return it to stock as group O."

He took her through the remainder of that night; she had done a cross-match for the head injury and taken a bottle of the appropriate blood up to the theatre. Davies had said he would set up a drip if Sir Charles asked for one and she had left the blood in his charge and gone to bed. She thought some of the night staff must have seen her as she returned down Nicholson's corridor. Grainger let her go.

It was quiet in Nicholson's room; presumably there were patients on either side, but no sound penetrated the walls. He could hear and smell the lunch trolleys, though, and little crescendos of sound rose and fell as footsteps came level with the door and passed it.

The detective wandered over to the window; he opened it and leaned out. Four floors up. . . . On the other hand, the two adjoining window sills weren't too far away—he looked down again and shuddered—not if you were desperate enough, and good at that sort of thing. . . .

He made his way thoughtfully down to the little office Fothergill had fixed him up with, and for a few seconds a pair of purple pyjamas fluttered before his mental vision . . . never had been bothered by heights, old Featherhead . . . the pinnacle of that chapel had been steeplejacks' territory. . . .

He found Mac waiting for him.

"Dabs came through with some stuff, thocht you might like it richt away," the sergeant remarked succinctly.

"I would, Mac. I don't seem to love this case very much at the moment." He glanced at his watch. "Hold your horses while I get through to the switchboard though . . . some of these people aren't easy to connect up with. If any of our 'possibles' are free now we'd better catch them while we can. . . ."

Five minutes later he put the phone back in its cradle. "Sir Charles is in Harley Street, Jonson's away sick and Rogers is at lunch," he remarked, and grinned as he caught a hungry gleam in the sergeant's eye.

"There's a place called the Hand in Hand round the corner here somewhere. I've one or two questions to ask them. Like to bring your stuff along with you?"

Some part of England's continuity is rooted in her pubs; beer and bright lights bring out the under-painting of the island race and the laconic Anglo-Saxon manner grows warmer as the dry cracks slip faster from wetted whistles. The tradition of Mine Hoste still lives in the genial faces behind the pump-handles, and the elaborate, polished wood, the engraved mirrors, the tiled tables, even the hideously ornamented glass in the swing doors are all invested with a conviviality that might have belonged to Merrie Englande.

The two detectives picked a quiet corner and Grainger frowned over the report Mac had brought him.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated when he'd finished reading. "If this weren't fact, I'd say it was absurd."

"Aye. Thocht ye'd be interested."

Grainger frowned quite fiercely at his sergeant.

"Dabs is convinced that every one of these prints has been made *since* Nicholson last used the typewriter?"

"Aye. He was dogmatic on that point."

"Damn it, there are so many—Harcourt, Rogers, Faraday and one unknown. . . . And their alibis are just as bad—they were all buzzing about up there between two and half past and yet nobody saw anything. I shall begin to believe it was a concerted murder if this goes on."

A large forkful of beef and onions disappeared into Mac's mouth; he champed thoughtfully.

"This lot 'ud be pretty used to working together, wouldn't they?"

Grainger shook his head. "They *were* working together, Mac—to save him. Nicholson was a very sick man. If their care had slipped up anywhere he'd have died anyway. If they'd been in it together they'd have had no need of strychnine. No, it's one single-minded killer we're hunting. And if Lamb hadn't happened in on that post-mortem we wouldn't be hunting him; from the killer's point of view that was a piece of sheer bad luck."

He glanced at his watch. "Rogers should be back from lunch by now; I'm going to find out how his prints came to be on Nicholson's private typewriter. No, you stay, Mac," he added as the sergeant gulped a last mouthful and stood up. "I want you to have a word with the barman; Harcourt and Summers claim they were in here together from nine until nearly ten that Monday night; the man should know them, they're here most Monday nights they tell me. See what he has to say. . . . I thought there was a certain studied vagueness about their timetable that night."

The detective found Alan Rogers in his little office in the X-ray department. The tall man rose and greeted him courteously, "I expect you're the Superintendent everyone's talking about." He went on with a smile, "Do you want me to answer some questions?"

"I do," Grainger answered. Rogers frowned a little at his tone and closed the door.

"Well, do sit down," he suggested; he brought a cigarette case from his pocket, clicked it open and offered it to the detective.

Grainger shook his head. "I'll smoke this, if I may," he said, producing his pipe.

"Of course." Rogers lit his own cigarette. "Well, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"You could tell me what you thought of Nicholson," Grainger suggested.

Rogers inhaled and blew smoke out through his nostrils. "I don't know that I thought about him very much," he answered easily. "Though when I did, it was probably to curse at him."

"Why was that?"

"Perhaps you haven't asked many of us yet. . . . I think you'll find it was a pretty standard reaction. He was an awkward devil to handle, you know."

"Yes?"

Rogers frowned a little. "I'm not sure what you want to know."

"In what way was he awkward?"

"Well, his whole way of going about things was awkward . . . but I imagine what mattered to most of us was that he wouldn't spend any money. Getting equipment out of him was a major battle."

"Had you any personal quarrel with Nicholson, Dr. Rogers?"

"Good heavens, no."

"Were you in the habit of using his office?"

"Of course not."

"Or his typewriter?"

There was a pause; Rogers was suddenly very still.

"No," he answered at last.

"Then how do you account for the fact that your fingerprints have been found on the keys of a portable that Mr. Nicholson was accustomed to keep in a locked cupboard in his office?"

"I must have used it."

"When?"

"I'm not sure."

The detective stared at the calm, big-boned face; Rogers's wasn't the kind you could shake into speech.

Biting on his pipe-stem he brought a photostat out of his breast pocket; Rogers watched him. The detective handed him the shiny rectangle with its massed lines of hieroglyphics.

"I'm sorry about this," his quiet voice commented, "but I think it will save us both time if you realise that I've seen it."

Rogers held it in his big hand and stared at it; tiny and strange as it looked in the photograph, he knew at once that it was Jean's writing. So that was how the brute had known . . . it was a photostat of the letter he had carried in his pocket for nearly five years now. . . . He glanced involuntarily at the coathooks on the wall. He always hung his jacket there when he changed into his white coat; a snooper with a camera could have got hold of it easily enough.

"I see." Unwillingly he held it out to the detective. Grainger shook his head. "There's no reason why you shouldn't keep it. But I want to know how your finger-prints came to be on that typewriter."

"Yes." Rogers tore the photostat into tiny fragments and dropped them into his pocket.

"I'm afraid that's not the only one," Grainger remarked. The radiologist looked up; his face was hard and sad.

"No. I suppose not." It was still a deep voice, but the resonance had seeped out of it. "I had a letter on this subject," he said. "It wasn't a signed letter and it was quite a long while ago. Naturally I always wondered who had sent it . . . particularly as it didn't only involve me. . . . One day a chance remark made me wonder if Nicholson could have been behind it. I went to his office in the evening when it was empty and saw that typewriter on his desk. I thought I'd try it to see if the type was the same as in my letter. . . ."

"And was it?"

"Yes."

"You say the typewriter was on his desk?"

"Yes."

"Was it open?"

"The lid was down, but it wasn't locked."

"When was this, Dr. Rogers?"

"Last Monday evening."

"The night Nicholson was killed?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"I'm not quite sure . . . probably about ten."

"What did you do about it?"

"I went home and thought hard. I couldn't decide what to do; I was still wondering when Nicholson died."

"Very conveniently for you."

"Very inconveniently for me," Rogers corrected him. "You're going to think I killed him."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Can you prove that?"

"No. Sir Charles's head-injury emergency was that night, wasn't it? I must have been quite close when someone gave Nick his *exeat*."

Grainger regarded him thoughtfully. "Have you any idea who did it, Dr. Rogers?"

Rogers lit another cigarette. He smoked it half-way down in silence. "No," he said.

"You knew Nicholson before he came here, didn't you?"

Rogers looked puzzled. "No, I didn't," he answered.

"Do you know of anyone on the staff here who was acquainted with Nicholson before he came to St. Justin's?"

The radiologist was silent again.

"No," he said at last.

Grainger stared at him for a few seconds. "Then I think that's all for the moment, Dr. Rogers." He stood up. Rogers pushed himself to his feet and his head rose above the detective's. 'He must be a good six inches over six foot,' Grainger thought, and wondered whether those long legs would be able to stretch from one window sill to another, way up on the fourth floor. . . .

The radiologist was trying to say something.

"If you've read that letter you'll know that there's a child involved in this," he said. "If it is at all possible to exercise discretion . . ."

Grainger's intelligent eyes rested on him quietly.

"The facts revealed in that letter will not be used unless they are relevant to the murder of Nicholson," he remarked finally.

Chapter Fifteen

The sudden intoxication of hope made Jean want to sing as she drove home; the instant she looked round the door and met Charlotte's eyes, she had seen it—the change for which she had prayed, for which she hadn't dared to hope. And Charlotte knew too . . . she was animated, confident, almost pretty—even her hair had a gloss and spring that Jean hadn't seen for months. . . . Not that they didn't both know what lay ahead; between the child's thin body and the rod-like bacilli entrenched in the quiescent lung a war of attrition continued. But something had happened, some trend that was as real as it was intangible had begun to swing like a tide into reverse. . . . Jean felt the happiness bursting inside her chest; she wanted to share it; she even wanted to share it with Charles. She put her foot down on the accelerator; perhaps he would be at home now. . . .

The house always sobered her a bit when it came into view. A huge neo-Georgian mansion blocking the horizon at the summit of the crescent drive, it seemed somehow such an edifice for two lonely people and one small girl. Sometimes the fancy troubled her that it had been the house that had so changed Charles. . . . She swung her car in through the gateway and for a moment the fleshy, overbearing man who was master of this desirable estate faded from her mind, and she remembered instead the man who had once been master of her heart. . . . He stood beside her, compelling as always, but lean and eager—ardent too, how ardent Charles had been in those days! He stood beside her, young and lithe in his war-time khaki, vibrant with excitement because he'd found their first home.

"Look!" he said, pointing at the dormer windows of the sleepy little cottage. "Look, isn't it exactly what you wanted! And there's a big garden." He grabbed her by the hand and hauling her after him with a happy disregard for her couponed stockings, began to map it out.

"We'll keep a pig," he said, "and chickens, and I'm going to lay this down to strawberries, I've ordered them today. And there's room for an asparagus bed . . ." He talked on, reeling out plan after plan from some private store of dreams.

"Darling," she said at last, "it's lovely, it's perfect . . . but, Charles, you may be posted at any moment."

She still remembered the queer suppressed anger in his face, the way his light blue eyes had seemed to change colour. Perhaps, she thought now, if I hadn't been so aggravatingly practical in those early days, always trying to tie his dreams to earth . . . but despite everything it had been such a happy summer. If only little Charlotte could have been born then while they still loved each other, while they still tried hard to speak each other's language. Or if she'd been the boy he so eagerly dreamed of . . .

But Charles's car wasn't in the drive now. Jean climbed out on to the immaculate gravel and opened her bag to look for keys. A scrunching noise behind her made her turn expectantly, but it was a strange car and a stranger was emerging from it, a tall lean man with sandy hair and horn-rimmed glasses. He came over and looked down at her with disquieting perception.

"Lady Hallet?"

"Yes . . . can I help you?"

"Well, I was wondering whether I could have a word with Sir Charles; they told me at the hospital that I might find him here."

"I don't think so," Jean said. "But we'll go in and make sure."

She left him in a huge formal drawing-room while she went to look.

"No, I'm afraid he's gone down to Harley Street," she said when she came back. "There's nothing I can do for you, is there?"

He smiled at her; she was slight and very graceful, and she looked somehow rather lost in the big imposing room. Her dark blue eyes were unexpectedly innocent; he wondered what manner of man Sir Charles would prove to be, and whether he knew that his wife was in love with another man.

"Perhaps you won't want to help me when you know who I am," he said, smiling.

"Why, who are you?" Her voice was startled.

"I'm from Scotland Yard. . . ."

"Oh yes, of course . . . about Nicholson."

"Yes. Did you know him?"

"Only very casually."

"You might be able to help me on one point; there seems to have been a spate of anonymous letters circulating round the hospital . . . you don't happen to know whether your husband received one of these, do you?"

She frowned uneasily. "No, I'm afraid I can't tell you. . . ."

"You haven't by any chance received one yourself?"

"No."

"Ah, well. I must be getting on my way. . . ." He stopped on his way to the door to look at a photograph of Charlotte.

"Your little girl?"

"Yes. . . ."

"I believe she's in St. Justin's at the moment?"

"She is."

"I hope you have good news of her?"

"Yes, I think. . . . I hope so . . . thank you."

"Is she at all prone to nightmares, can you tell me?"

Jean looked puzzled. "No. Not more than any child who has been ill a great deal."

Grainger frowned as he drove through the thickening traffic towards Harley Street; the side effects of his cases always worried him. How many innocent people, he wondered, caught up now in this tangle of violence and retribution, would find that the later course of their lives had been altered by their more or less accidental involvement? It was a weighted question and he didn't like it very much.

As he turned down the Marylebone Road towards the north end of Harley Street, his mind fidgeted with the problem of Harcourt. An intensive interrogation on the subject of Nicholson's typewriter and Nicholson's keys had produced the confessions he was aiming for. The registrar had left the Hand in Hand a good deal earlier than he had disclosed, routed about in Nicholson's office until he found the locked cupboard, borrowed the sick man's keys from his dressing-table, found the typewriter and recognised the type. According to his account he was interrupted before he could put everything back. He escaped without being seen, and without knowing who had interrupted him. Just before eleven, he managed to slip back; he shoved the little portable into the cupboard and replaced Nicholson's keys on his dressing-table. It was while he was trying to do this that he was seen by Night Sister.

But the barrage of questions that had chipped their way down to this set of facts had also fractured the young man's uneasy control . . . he appeared to expect immediate arrest and rattled on disconnectedly about killers running in his family. At intervals he swore that he hadn't killed Nicholson, adding that he might just as well have done for all the difference it made.

Grainger grimaced as he went over the scene in his mind . . . it was premature to make an arrest—but this shaken man was a surgeon. . . . Was he justified in letting him loose on his patients?

Even for Harley Street, Sir Charles's consulting-rooms were imposing; an aura of 'the great man' lit up the way through soft-spoken receptionists and secretaries to the surgeon's presence and Grainger felt a few iconoclastic prickles rising . . . but when a last hushed door swung open and his critical eyes fell on the heavy, hunched figure awaiting him, he had to admit that Sir Charles's dominance was genuine. With Harcourt still fresh in his mind it struck the detective forcibly that nothing would ever shake this man's vocational virtuosity; he might be a sinner, he might even be a killer, but whatever he might or might not prove to be, his professional acumen would never be in doubt.

"They tell me you're the fellow from the Yard. What d'you want?"

Evidently courtesy wasn't one of his weaknesses.

"I should like to have your comments on an unsigned letter you received a couple of months or so ago, Sir Charles. . . ."

"Wasting your time, I'm afraid. If it was unsigned it wouldn't reach me. You can ask my secretaries if you like." He turned away as though the interview were at an end.

"This letter would not have come to you through your secretaries, Sir Charles. It is probable that it never even went through the post."

Sir Charles glanced ostentatiously at his watch.

"Can't help you, I'm afraid."

"It was a most improper letter and should, of course, never have been compiled," Grainger went on as though the surgeon hadn't spoken. "But it appears Nicholson made rather a habit of that sort of thing. . . ."

"Nicholson? I thought this epistle was unsigned?"

"It was unsigned, but Nicholson was the author of it. An unpopular fellow, I gather, but so far his scandalous missives have contained accurate information. He is dead and I cannot afford to disregard this. . . ."

"Nicholson was a twister," the surgeon interrupted impatiently. He glared balefully at Grainger as he went on. "If you're capable of taking advice, you'll look into the hospital accounts. If the committee had any spunk they'd have insisted on an independent auditor years ago."

"Did you suggest that to them?" Grainger inquired with interest.

"Naturally."

"But your advice wasn't taken?"

"No."

"Why was that?"

Sir Charles shrugged. "Committees talk; they don't do anything."

Grainger laughed. "Oh come, surely committee deliberations must sometimes lead to action?"

The surgeon's hunched, standing figure with its heavy shoulders and forward-stooping head made Grainger think of an alarmingly intellectual blond gorilla. 'It must be those little legs,' he decided, becoming aware of these appendages in their neat, striped trousers between the surgeon's massive trunk and the sumptuous Persian carpet at his feet. Phew, what a carpet . . . and it hadn't been tossed down to hide the parquet floor either. . . . As his full attention returned to Sir Charles's face, the detective found a fleeting moment to wonder whether this palatial room might not be a cage as well as a symbol of success. . . .

"Well, they didn't get action, did they?" the surgeon remarked succinctly. "Unless you count a dose of strychnine."

"Not the committee type of solution, I agree," Grainger returned with amusement. He was silent for a moment, his eyes on the tall windows; down below, the patient traffic revved and braked as it threaded its way through the double-parked cars.

"It seems more likely that some determined individual saw an opportunity to tidy Nicholson out of the way, wouldn't you say? Someone like yourself, for instance. . . ."

The surgeon's eyebrows rose. "Possibly my sense of humor is not up to the police standards," he remarked dryly. "Moreover I'd be obliged if you'd do your speculating somewhere else; it may have escaped your attention that I'm a busy man."

Grainger's hand had gone to an inside pocket; he brought out a folded sheet of typescript and handed it to the surgeon. "These notes on your private affairs were compiled by Nicholson; I would like your comments on them."

Sir Charles made no sound and not a muscle of his face moved, but his anger burnt the air. He crumpled the sheet and threw it at the detective.

"You wanted my comments." ('You could have hacked through an iron girder with the edge on his voice,' thought the detective.) "They are as follows: Nicholson was my patient and I saved his life."

Grainger had neatly fielded the ball of paper and was smoothing it out.

Suavely he took the angry surgeon through the events of Monday night, from a medical meeting at eight o'clock to the operation on the injured head of the V.I.P. at eleven-twenty and his final return home at about two A.M.

Finger-prints came next; Sir Charles submitted to the process with disdainful patience, ostentatiously scrubbing his hands afterwards in the wash-basin in the corner of his room.

Grainger viewed the white-coated underlings sympathetically as they ushered him out; he suspected that one of them was due to bear the brunt of Sir Charles's swallowed rage.

As his long-suffering car nosed its way from Harley Street to Soho, Grainger wondered how often Sir Charles had made this same journey. Also, if he'd used his car, where on earth he'd managed to park!

He was on foot by the time he found what he wanted. The smells of Soho narrowed to a more domestic focus as he pressed up the dark, grimy staircase to the first floor; yes, there was the name above the bell.

There was a scrabbling noise behind the door and a moment later a small boy stared belligerently up at him. Grainger grinned at the urchin in astonishment; it was absurd that this three feet of manhood should be so startlingly like Sir Charles.

"What do you want?"

There was a glimmer of Italian in his speech.

"I want to talk to your Mummy."

But Mummy had arrived; she was a plump, dark little woman with the friendly smile of her race. The door was shut and the dirty anonymous staircase faded away; Grainger found himself in a shabby, comfortable room, plush curtains, an ancient Turkey carpet, a one-ended sofa of the indestructible kind, a smell of garlic and cooking oil . . . the only modern thing in the room was an expensive model train, set out in apple-pie order on the table in the centre. The detective wandered towards it. . . .

"Mustn't touch!" ordered the child. "Daddy cross if you touch. Daddy and me play trains. No one else."

Grainger cast a humorous glance at the little spitfire. "I'm just admiring it," he said. "It's a lovely set. Did Daddy give it to you?"

"Yes. It cost lots and lots of pennies."

"I'm sure it did."

His mother apologised for him and drew the child off with promises of ice-cream; she followed him into the kitchen in search of change and Grainger's glance wandered rapidly over the numerous photographs in the room. There were none of Sir Charles. He had brought one with him and had it ready for her when she came back.

She was startled; he saw her hands trembling as she took it.

"Accident?"

"No. No accident. I only want you to identify him for me."

Her face changed.

"But this, it is not possible. I do not know him."

She wasn't a practised liar; the stiff sentences creaked and her answers grew stupid and repetitive, but loyalty kept her steady. She tried to waylay the child when he returned, but Grainger was too quick for her. As the door opened he propped the glossily printed face against the electric train; the child saw it at once and came running into the room, his mouth ringed with ice-cream. . . .

"It's Daddy?" he shouted, and turned hopefully to Grainger. "Is he coming today?"

The detective walked away again down the stairs; it seemed to him premature to embarrass the mother with questions.

Chapter Sixteen

Alfred Jonson, the anaesthetist, was away sick, and Grainger now sought him out in his home to question him. The pretty, well-ordered avenue was quiet and reticent in the early darkness of the winter night, its summer froth of flowering trees quiescent now—acacias naked and graceful against the December sky, a few last pods rattling on the dropping laburnam. The frost was crisp and curly on the tidy grass verges, it sparkled on the gate under the bright lamplight, and against the black sky it lay thin and white on the neat tiles that roofed the family in.

Grainger pushed the bell. A light shone through drawn curtains on the bedroom floor. Dulcet chimes broke out in the hall and he heard a child's voice and unhurried footsteps on the stairs. In the bedroom a shadow stirred and for a few seconds a face appeared in the crack.

Down below, the front door opened; a woman stood there, silhouetted against the warm light, a plain, plump woman, as enveloped in composure as a seal in blubber. Grainger explained what he wanted and she took him upstairs to a warm, comfortable bedroom, furnished with quilted silk and polished wood and a starry wallpaper and bright white linen under the sick man's pale face and plump, soft shoulders. A toddler in a sleeping-suit was playing on the carpet; his mother bent and scooped him up and he burbled at his father and blew kisses with a fat hand over her shoulder as she bore him off. The grey-faced little man with the glasses beamed and waved with the bemused unself-consciousness of a youth in love.

"A fine boy," Grainger remarked, hoping the child's hair-style hadn't misled him.

"You think so?" A public-school accent echoed from long-ago boyhood, but the sick man's voice was burred by some enormous fatigue so that it sounded like a worn gramophone record. "He's—he's a good little fellow."

"Sorry to chase you in the sickroom," Grainger went on, standing easily by the end of the bed. Alfred Jonson certainly looked ill, but was it, the detective wondered as he studied the pale face, a sickness primarily of the body or of the mind?

"It's about the death of your senior administrator. I believe you've not been to the hospital since the post-mortem?"

"No. No, I haven't. I—I've had a dose of flu, you know."

His grey face was blank and still; Grainger couldn't see his hands, they were under the covers.

"Have you anything to tell me about it?"

Jonson's forehead creased perplexedly. "Well, no, I haven't really . . . we were all very startled, of course, when Lamb hit the mark like that. It seemed a preposterous suggestion at the time."

Grainger eyed him in silence for a moment. 'It's odd,' he thought, 'how that voice lends him more authority than, looking at him, one would give him credit for.'

"Preposterous in what way?" he inquired. "That strychnine was responsible for that appearance? Or did you mean it seemed to you preposterous that anyone should have murdered Nicholson?"

Jonson's pale lips twisted in a humorless smile.

"Well, both, I suppose. Not that strychnine didn't fit the picture once you'd thought of it . . . but as a doctor . . . well, murder isn't a cause of death that readily occurs to you."

"And yet I feel you will agree with me, Dr. Jonson, when I say that Nicholson was the sort of man who might tend to invite . . . shall we say . . . murderous thoughts?"

The man on the bed lay unnaturally still.

"I don't think I quite understand you," he said, and as before, his voice dressed up for him as that pale face refused to do.

"I will put it more plainly. You discovered recently, did you not, Dr. Jonson, that Everard Nicholson was responsible for the anonymous letters you received?"

It seemed almost indecent to watch that moment of naked despair. Grainger blinked uneasily and was relieved when the sixth-form voice answered quite coolly through its blur of fatigue:

"I'm afraid there's some mistake. I have not received any anonymous letters."

The detective took a folded paper from his inside pocket.

"Perhaps you would like me to read this to you," he said.

The sick man cast a terrified look at the closed door of the room.

"No!" He seemed to shrink as he collapsed back on to his plump white pillows. Above the shining discs of glass the sweat stood out on his forehead; his grey-streaked, reddish hair clung darkly to his scalp, like the damp coat of a roan pony that has galloped too far and too fast.

"I apologise for deceiving you about that letter, Superintendent," the voice continued at last. "I couldn't see that it had any relevance and I am anxious that its contents shouldn't become public property. If you have read it, you will realise that nothing criminal is concerned." There was a long pause before he brought himself to say, "Since by some means I don't understand it has got into your hands, I must ask you— Oh, God!" His face contorted as he spoke and suddenly he sat up and faced the detective with a fanatical stare.

"I won't have my wife and child know I was an inmate in that asylum, d'you understand?" His voice had dropped to a hoarse whisper.

Grainger looked calmly at the overwrought man.

"Don't worry, Dr. Jonson," he answered equably, "it's quite unnecessary for your family to know anything about this; so long as you give me all the information I need." He paused deliberately. "In fact, you knew that letter came from Nicholson, didn't you?"

"No. . . . I didn't know." Jonson sank back on his pillows again. "Perhaps . . . perhaps I suspected him . . . but I suspected a lot of people."

"Have you ever handled Mr. Nicholson's private portable typewriter, Dr. Jonson?"

"No . . . not to my knowledge. . . ."

"It seems a little improbable you could have used it without knowing you were doing so?"

"Yes . . . I suppose it does."

"You knew he had a machine for his personal use?"

"Well, no, I think you told me, didn't you?"

"Where did he keep it?"

"I've no idea."

Grainger turned a page of his notebook.

"At what time did you leave the hospital on the day of Nicholson's operation?"

"It would have been after Sir Charles finished his list . . . about seven, I should say."

"Did you come straight home?"

"Yes."

"Arriving at what time?"

Jonson hesitated. "No . . . now I come to think of it, I didn't. I—yes, that was it, I had some books to return to the Royal Society of Medicine. I drove down there with them."

"Did you return home then?"

"No—I . . . there was a medical meeting on nearby and I decided to look in for a short time."

Grainger asked for the address and took it down.

"Sir Charles Hallet tells me he was also at that meeting," he remarked then. "Possibly you met there?"

"No—er—no. I didn't see Sir Charles. But I was only there for a short time."

"And after that?"

"I came home."

"Arriving at what time?"

"Oh—er—it must have been getting on for ten. The traffic was rather thick that night."

"Evidently," commented Grainger, staring hard at him. "And what did you do next?"

"I remained here until the emergency call came through at eleven."

"What did you do when you arrived at St. Justin's?"

"I went straight up to the theatre."

"Did you call in on Nicholson on the way?"

"No."

"Perhaps you paid a visit to the dispensary?"

"No."

"And afterwards?"

"I returned home."

"At what time?"

"I'm not sure . . . it was very late and I wasn't feeling any too good. It must have been the flu coming on."

"Who did you see on your way out?"

Jonson frowned. "I'm afraid I can't remember, it's all a blur. But there are always people about. . . . I imagine somebody must have seen me."

Which made it all the odder, Grainger thought, that apparently no one had. But there seemed nothing further to be got from Dr. Jonson at the moment.

Grainger grinned rather wearily at Mac as he packed the file away later that night.

"We'll be back on our concerted murder theory if this goes on," he said. "They're all quite frankly glad he's dead, and I haven't found a single case in which I can disprove opportunity." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes; in concentrated silence he polished the lenses with his handkerchief. Across the desk, Mac sat still and waited for what was coming.

"We've got to go back before we can go forward," Grainger said, almost as if he were speaking to himself. He slipped the tortoise-shell frames back over his ears and went on:

"We've a ghost to lay tomorrow, Mac. The ghost of Eric Nicholaus Von König. Dig up the address on that birth certificate, will you? We're going down there in the morning."

Chapter Seventeen

It was a relief to break free at last from London's attenuated suburban tentacles; Mac put his foot down on the accelerator and the big black car dipped and swung along the undulating road, past five-barred gates and ploughed fields and huge, bare, winter trees and hedgerows sparkling with hoarfrost in the thin December sun. Grainger stretched his long legs and drew at his pipe with almost hungry enjoyment; a village went by, a square Norman tower above the quiet graves, ironmongery and Christmas presents jostling for space in the village store; flint cottages, cosy and independent in the fierce east wind; the sign creaking on the Three Tuns, green-painted seats forlorn in the forecourt but clouds of blue woodsmoke flying from the wide chimney into the cold sky.

Past the thirty-mile-limit, faster up the hill, and suddenly on the next horizon, the downs. Such quiet, unassuming hills, no ravines, no precipices, just benign green-furred chalk monsters that leisurely stretch their length across Wessex, and yet, Granger thought, one had only to catch sight of those calm green shoulders against the sky and one's breath imperceptibly quickened.

They breasted two blunt ridges and swept down into the next valley, and there between the hills lay the village of Brading. It had the neat, self-contained air of a village in the grip of winter and Grainger wondered whether they'd find anyone willing to be forthcoming about Eric

Nicholaus Von König, born in this parish some forty years ago.

"Drive slowly through, Mac, and we'll look for a likely spot to begin," he said.

The ugly oblong house was right at the end of the village; an Edwardian outcrop, it had never belonged with the cottages that had made up Brading's main street for the past three or four hundred years, but stood out, rigid and unlovely in its yellow brick against the blunt green downs that ringed the village in. A wooden name-plate nailed across the steep, saw-toothed porch, announced in Gothic script, The Laurels.

"Of course it's a common name, but nevertheless definitely worth trying," Grainger agreed with his sergeant, and the two front doors of the black police car opened together, like the wing-cases of a beetle, as the detectives climbed out into the fierce December wind.

A sound of withdrawn bolts preceded the opening of the front door and Grainger recognised in the sound the true country-dweller for whom a front door is a convention rather than a means of ingress. A plump, pale girl stared at him with mild astonishment; she was neatly dressed and her brown hair was piled high round her head like a lot of sausage rolls.

Grainger smiled at her. "Your name is not by any chance Von König, is it?" he asked.

"Nay; Smith's our name."

There was a pause; Grainger said nothing, he knew his countryfolk. And sure enough under that clear-eyed placidity, the girl had been marshalling such information as she possessed.

"'Appen there were a Von König did live in the 'ouse, though. But 'twere long enough ago."

To the astonishment of the two detectives she suddenly wheeled about and called loudly, "Eg! . . . EG!"

An enormous, genial-faced redhead appeared at the end of the passageway. "What's up then, Mary?" he inquired.

"'Tes two gentlemen, Eg; they want fer to knoaw if so be there's a Von König do live 'ere. I thought as ye could tell 'um more'n I could maybe. Seems like ye did say once as 'ow the 'ouse 'ad belonged to a foreigner when you was a little lad. . . ."

The large Eg advanced down the little passage. 'Sakes, he's quite a tight fit in there,' Mac thought as he stood by his chief, watching the scene. He hunched his own broad shoulders as a gust of wind bounced off the hills and whipped along the village street.

"Aye, 'tes right enough. A schoolmaster 'e were, used fer to teach at the big school oaver yonder. Dare say as 'ow ye've 'eard tell o' Radford, sir, just oaver the 'ill from 'ere, 'tes. They 'adn't built no 'ouses f'r the masters, not then, them that was married used to live in Brading here or over to Furneaux where my Mary come from. But it mun be all o' twenty-five years since th' oald man sold up and gone. I were oanly a nipper at the time, reckon there's not much I can tell ye."

"Well, Mr. Smith, I'm very grateful for what you have told me." Grainger smiled pleasantly at the couple standing behind one another in the narrow doorway.

"You don't happen to know of anyone in Brading who might be able to tell me about Von König, I suppose? I've met old folks sometimes who've a better memory for twenty-five years ago than for last week."

The young countryman grinned reminiscently as he nodded.

"'Appen there is then," he remarked cheerfully. "You try oald Mrs. Titmuss, first cottage on th' left past the church. Lives with 'er grandchildren now, she do, but she were 'ousekeeper to your Mr. Von König. She'll be glad enough to talk oaver oald times if ye've a few minutes to listen. Oaver eighty she be now, an' a bit 'ard of 'earing, but there ain't nuthin' amiss with 'er memory. I can speak f'r that," he added, grinning.

Nor was there; even the immolating cold of the little best parlour didn't inhibit her. They sat gingerly on chintzy chairs among sepia prints of Highland Glens, and on the mantel the pretty gilt clock tinkled the minutes away in the security of its glass dome as the little old woman carried them back to a forgotten world.

She started in 1911, the year the stiff young German schoolmaster had settled in at The Laurels and engaged her as his housekeeper.

"Two years I worked for 'un afore 'e married Miss Felicity from up at the vicarage, and manny's the time in thoase two years I nearly packed me bag and gone huntin' for another place. Mr. Von König, 'e were that stern and disdainful like 'tweren't no good tryin' to please 'un. I think maybe 'e didn't take too much to schoolmasterin', and then again our English ways did annoy 'un. But I couldn't see no sense in that; stands to reason if you lives in other folks' country they'll 'ave different ways from your'n."

"I quite agree, Mrs. Titmuss," Grainger remarked smiling. "But he married Miss Felicity, did he, and you changed your mind about staying on?"

"Aye, that were the way on it. I couldn't leave Miss Felicity an' later, o' course, there was little Eric and the baby."

The two detectives held their tongues and waited.

"'Course," the old lady went on, "ye two gentlemen never did knoaw our Miss Felicity, se ye woan't unnerstand 'ow she could change folk an' their ways; like spring after winter 'twere in that 'ouse after she did come. We niver did unnerstand why 'twere 'im she did marry, such a gloomy, awkward sort o' man he were afore, but one thing we did 'ave to agree, 'e thought the whoal world of 'er. There weren't nuthin' 'e wouldn't do for 'er. 'E even 'ad 'isself made British so's their children wouldn't 'ave to be foreigners like 'im.

"'E were a bit stiff-like wi' rest on us, mind ye, but Miss Felicity, she toald me about that; seems 'e did ought t' 'a' been a Count or some such 'igh-up thing, 'e'd growed up expectin' it, y'see. A mint o' money there were too, but 'e were done out of it so Miss Felicity did tell me, and it soured 'un like to think on't.

"But after 'e were married, 'e didn't seem to mind no more, 'e were that 'appy 'avin' 'is wife to come whoame to, end of each day. Soon as door banged shut, 'Felicity', 'e'd call, 'Felicity!' and she'd come runnin' in from the garden to see 'im. Very dainty built she were, wi' soft 'air that blew over 'er face . . . I can see 'er now, standin' there laughin', so 'appy, and little Eric hangin' on to 'er 'and. . . ."

"Eric was their little boy, was he?"

"Aye, born in the spring, end o' their first year, the boy were, an' as good a little lad as ye could wish f'r while 'is mother were alive. A proper nice little family they was at The Laurels for them few years; 'course, later on, there weren't no one'd say a good word for Eric nor 'is father, but as I used to tell 'em there weren't no 'appier 'ouse in all Brading than The Laurels afore Miss Felicity come to die."

"Mrs. Von König died young, did she?"

"Only in 'er twenties she were, poor young thing. On Master Eric's fourth birthday that were, the day 'is little sister were born . . . we was all that 'appy with the news. A lovely May mornin' 'twere and I'd made Master Eric 'is cake wi' four candles . . . we was goin' to take it up to shoaw 'is Mum come tea time and take a peep at 's little sister. But that mornin' Miss Felicity started to bleed . . . all mornin' she bled and bled an' for all 'e fought to save 'er, doctor couldn't keep 'er with us.

"Poor Mr. Von König, 'e were demented like wi' grief an' he turns and blames doctor for lettin' 'er go. . . . But 'tweren't doctor, 'twere Our Lord 'd made up 'is mind to take 'er from us . . . there weren't nuthin' nobody could do.

"Sometimes after that day I couldn't 'ardly believe 'twere same 'ouse; there weren't no laughter ever anny more, even the flowers in Miss Felicity's garden died for lack o' carin' for. It seemed like Mr. Von König didn't want nuthin' but to go same way; 'e wouldn't take no interest in little Master Eric, an' the poor little bairn she died of, 'e wouldn't 'ave 'er in 'is sight.

"Folks think as bairns doan't unnerstand, but that ain' right. 'E were oanly four years oald, Master Eric, but 'e'd got it worked out soon enough 'is Mum wasn't niver comin' back to 'im. I tried to comfort 'is little mind, but 'twere 'is Dad 'e needed, and 'is Dad were so drownded in 's own sorrow 'e couldn't see the little chap wanted 'im so. That's when Master Eric begun to change. 'E growed up into a bad boy, Master Eric did an' broke 'is Dad's 'eart; but the way it seemed to me, it all begun when 'is Mum died an' 'is father niver 'ad a word for the little chap's troubles. 'Twere wors'n that—Mr. Von König niver saw 'un but 'e snapped an' growled like a wolf wi' the jaw-ache."

"Poor little chap," Grainger murmured sympathetically. "But at least *you* stayed with him, did you, Mrs. Titmuss?"

"Aye, there weren't nuthin' else I could do. But I might as well 'a' saved my trouble for all the good it did. From bad to worse it went . . . little fellow's sister died—she were weakly all along—an' Master Eric were more on's own than ever. 'E weren't niver allowed to visit other little boys in the village . . . 'twere a rare pity that, th're were many in Brading would 'a' been glad to give a 'elpin' 'and to Miss Felicity's little lad, and lads can't be grievin' when they're playing wi' sticks and stoanes and muckin' about wi' others o' their own kind.

"Come little chap's fifth birthday, 'is Dad sends 'im off to 'is Aunty in Germany, and that's where he starts school. 'E'd write to me at first, little notes like bairns do. 'E didn't say much, but ye could tell 'e were that 'omesick over there in a strange country and no one 'e knew and everyone talkin' funny. I didn't see 'un again, not 'til 'e were ten, and then 'e didn't look like my Eric, so stiff 'e were, an' 'is nice soft 'air that were like 'is Mum's cropped so close ye could see 'is skin under't; an' 'e spoke funny, like a foreigner an' clicked 'is 'eels like they Germans love to do. All that were natural, just foreignness like, but all 'is troubles 'ad turned 'is soft 'eart 'ard inside of 'un.

"Tormentin' a little puppy-dog, 'e were, when I found 'un next day. That were the one thing 'e allus 'ad yammered for, a puppy-dog—his Mum she promised 'im one for 'is fifth birthday. . . . 'I'll get round y'r Dad,' she said, for Mr. Von König, 'e wouldn't 'ave no truck wi' animals.

"I spoke to 'un sharp-like, an' 'e give over, an' I takes poor little critter an' cuddles it in me coat to quiet 'is whimperin' . . . but I were that full wi' rememberin' our lad an' 'is Mum . . . so soft-'earted 'e were then, 'e'd 'ave a little weep when 'e found a fledglin' fallen out o' its nest. . . ."

A moment of bewildered distress had floated across thirty years to trouble the old lady again now. But it drifted past and Mrs. Titmuss plunged again into the flood of reminiscence:

"'T were that Christmas when Eric come 'ome from Germany as Mr. Von König suddenly took notice o' the boy. 'E give the lad lessons so's 'e'd be ready to go to Radford when 'e were old enough, for Mr. Von König 'e were still a teacher there. That were when 'e learned as 'ow Eric 'ad a good 'ead on 'im; I could 'a' told 'un that afore 'e sent the lad away, but 'un niver axed me. Seemed it went to 'is father's 'ead, 'is boy bein' so bright and when the time came for Eric to go back to Germany 'twere 'is Dad's turn to wish 'e weren't goin'. But 'twere too late—little lad's 'eart 'ad closed up like—'un weren't in way o' lovin'—I dunno as you follow my way o' speakin', sir. . . ."

"Entirely, Mrs. Titmuss," Grainger answered, and added after a moment, "and did Eric go to Radford?"

"Aye, won a scholarship 'e did. Real clever 'e were. 'Is Dad were that proud of 'un; but 'tweren't no good. Summat 'ad 'appened inside of our Eric and seemed like nuthin'd ever put it right. 'E didn't niver make friends . . . allus alone 'e were. 'E won a scholarship to university too, but 'e were too young for going up there so 'e stayed on at school, just markin' time like."

"But he went up to Oxford later?"

"I doan't rightly knoaw, sir. 'E left school very sudden an' Mr. Von König, 'e left same time. 'E sold 'is 'ome and went right away, an' I niver did 'ear what come to 'em, not to Eric nor 'is father."

The two detectives thanked the old lady and stood grinning like bashful schoolboys as they weathered a barrage of introductions to three generations of Titmusses on their way out. At last they bent their heads under the low lintel of the cottage and re-emerged into the December wind.

"Ye didna try the photographs on the old lady?" Mac remarked as the car surged over the next flank of the downs on the road to Radford.

"No, perhaps I should have done." Grainger sounded preoccupied. The big car had breasted the hill and was swooping down upon Radford by the time he spoke again. A mile or two from the village the two men could see the roof of the school.

"It's rather a long interval and her sight's probably none too good," he said, suddenly taking it up. "Besides, she's a faithful old soul and she may have hoped the boy improved as he grew up."

Mac's big head moved dubiously. "I doot it," he remarked, "she'd a pretty good notion o' the way he was goin'."

"Yes." Grainger sighed. "Actually the school should be the best place to identify him for us in any case. We'll get them to dig out their group photos for the years he was there."

The school secretary seemed rather startled to find two detectives in his office but he ushered them without demur into the headmaster's study. 'A book-lined room is always pleasant,' Grainger thought, 'but when one can also look out of mullioned windows at the downs, idyllic isn't too strong a word.'

He said as much to the quiet, dark-eyed man who came across the room to meet him.

Dr. Mathieson laughed: "You've forgotten the four hundred boys who are having lunch at the moment, haven't you? But I won't inflict that spectacle on you, for I gather you're not prospective parents. My secretary tells me you want me to trace an Old Boy. . . . Look, do sit down." He seated himself at his desk; frowning a little he went on, "I'll do anything I can, of course, but speaking as headmaster of the O.B.'s school, I do rather hope he won't mind."

"On that point I can put you at your ease right away," Grainger turned. "The man we're investigating is dead. We've only come back this far in his history (it's thirty years or more since he left here) because it seems likely that he changed his identity at some point in his career."

"Oh I see, yes. Well, I've only been here eight years myself, so I can't help you much personally, but I'll put you on to somebody who should be able to. Old Dickson's been at Radford for forty years and more . . . he must have known the boy. He'll reminisce freely enough if the fellow was interested in his subject, if not I'm afraid you may have to coax him. . . ." The headmaster grimaced humorously and Grainger caught a momentary glimpse of the boy who had once been father to this pleasant-faced, greying scholar. "Old Dickson's reached the age when he's a law unto himself," Mathieson explained, "but he has a formidable memory if you can once get him started."

"We'll aim to be persuasive, then," the detective answered smiling. "Incidentally, what *is* Mr. Dickson's subject?"

"Art."

"Oh. Well, we'll do our best. Actually I'm hoping to trace the boy's father at the same time, for he taught at Radford, both while he was here, and for some years before."

"Did he then. . . . What was his name?"

"Von König."

"Von König." The lines on the headmaster's forehead deepened and his dark eyes developed a faraway look. "Yes, I think I've heard that name. . . ." He stood up suddenly. "I'll take you round to old Dickson, shall I?"

The two detectives had also risen.

"There is just one other thing," Grainger said. "I hope it won't prove a frightful nuisance, but if you should have records of your group photographs of the school, say from 1927 to 1932 . . ."

"Yes, comparison for identity, of course. No, no trouble, we can easily do that for you. I'll put my secretary on to it. If you get anywhere with old Dickson, you're likely to be some time; would you like the photos brought round to you there—they might come in useful, perhaps?"

Through the haze of smoke, the figure of an ancient man was just demonstrable; old Dickson's head was huge and heavily whiskered and one had the impression that he'd done without a neck for some years now. His two visitors advanced cautiously through the acrid-smelling smoke. . . . "Milk," Mac murmured suddenly, and Grainger nodded; they had both caught sight of the saucepan with its coffee-coloured head of foam running busily over to the electric ring. Nuances of less powerful odours were wafted at them from other parts of the room, tobacco smoke, linseed oil, turpentine, chrysanthemums. . . .

The great head was turned towards them now and a pair of deeply hollowed, incurious eyes stared out at them for a moment under bushy overhanging crags.

"I won't keep you a moment, gentlemen." His voice was muffled and cavernous. He waved a paint-encrusted palette at them, "Sit down." And with the air of one who has done his duty, old Dickson returned to the canvas set wide and low on the easel by his chair.

The two detectives exchanged a glance and sat down. After five minutes Grainger glanced at his watch and remarked mildly:

"Would it help if I took the coffee off?"

"Mmm?" the whiskered head made a ponderous quarter-turn. "Ah, hmm." Wrapping a paint rag round the handle, the old man gingerly removed the smoking saucepan. He stared down into it disconsolately for some minutes and placed it thoughtfully on the hearth. After a few minutes further thought he switched off the ring with his foot, stared interestedly at the smoke still rising from the blackened surface and returned to his easel.

"Mr. Dickson," Grainger remarked loudly.

"Mmm? Oh, yes . . . sorry I can't offer you any more coffee. What was it you wanted?"

"Thirty years or so ago there was a boy here called Von König. Do you remember him?"

"Father and son."

"Yes, you've got them. What did you think of them?"

"Which one?"

"The son."

"He was no good."

"No?"

The old man had laid down his palette and brush and was investigating the bowl of his pipe. It had gone out and he began to light it, carefully and ponderously, like a chimp.

"Suppose he couldn't help it," the muffled voice continued. His hairy paint-stained hands cupped the match and Grainger wondered how he managed to smoke without setting his whiskers alight. "Just born bad," Dickson continued dispassionately. "Some are."

"Um?"

"I tried to persuade him to give it up."

"Was this in his early days at Radford?" Grainger inquired.

"What?"

Grainger raised his voice.

"Oh yes. Clear from the first."

The detective nodded and raised his eyebrows; it occurred to him that Dickson's remarkable nose for moral inadequacy would be handy for a member of the force.

"What form did his—er—defects take?" he inquired next.

The old man considered.

"Well, I suppose his colour was particularly offensive. . . ." Grainger gave him a startled stare, but the old man was continuing almost petulantly. "Wasn't even as if he was colour-blind . . . no excuse at all. Hadn't any sense of form either. Quite unteachable, simply didn't mean a thing to him."

"But—er . . ." Grainger began.

"Mind you," the old man continued, sublimely oblivious of the effect he was causing, "he was a careful craftsman.

There was no art in it, mind you, just application. Von König wasn't lazy. Wasn't a fool either, come to that. He was just a barbarian."

"I see, yes. Actually I wanted to ask——"

"Those fake coins were beautifully made," Dickson rumbled on, unwittingly silencing Grainger. "That was Von König all over. Doubt if anyone else could have got away with it. Say what you like about him, the boy had a sense of detail. They had to expel him of course. Old Von König took it very hard. Boy was clever, I believe."

"He was expelled for making fake coins?"

"Well, he sold the originals, out of the museum, you know. Quite a schemozzle it caused. The father left too. Miserable old curmudgeon. Probably didn't give the boy enough pocket-money. Mightn't have done it if he had."

A knock sounded on the door and the school secretary groped his way in through the haze, a clutch of yellowed group photographs in one hand.

"Dr. Mathieson asked me to bring you these, sir."

Grainger thanked him and smiled involuntarily at the lines of boys staring out at him, arrayed in the schoolboys' paraphernalia of thirty years ago.

"Hold these a moment, Mac, will you," he said; and from his own briefcase he abstracted two police photos of the dead man, and several hospital groups in which Nicholson figured.

Dickson had returned to his canvas. The detective walked over to him and raised his voice:

"I'd be very grateful, sir, if you would tell me whether you recognise this man." And he handed over the two police photos of the dead man, one bald, one toupée-topped.

Dickson gave them a long, unemotional stare.

"No," he replied uncompromisingly.

Grainger handed him the hospital groups. "Do you recognise anyone here?" he asked.

The Art Master looked them over with bored but conscientious attention. He stared for some time at a younger and slimmer edition of Nicholson in the earliest group.

"Shouldn't have thought of it if I hadn't been talking about him," the muffled, hollow voice remarked. "But that fellow looks a bit like old Von König if you take the hair off . . . alters the shape of the skull, doesn't it?" He picked up the bald police photo. "Got fat, didn't he," he remarked dispassionately. "Yes, he's wearing a toupée all along, but not the same one. He graded the age rather nicely . . . a sense of detail, mm? Why do you want to know?" he inquired, displaying curiosity for the first time.

Grainger glanced at him. He picked up the police photo.

"This fellow came to a sticky end; he called himself Everard Nicholson, but it looks as if he may have started life as Eric Nicholaus Von König."

"Hmm."

Grainger signalled to Mac to hand over the school groups.

"Could you point out the young Von König for me, sir?" The two detectives leaned over the old man's massive shoulder and stared thoughtfully at the slim boy with the secretive face who had grown taller and more arrogant in each successive photograph. There was nothing that could rule out his identity with Everard Nicholson, but neither was the resemblance at all obvious.

"That's the father," Dickson said, pointing to a glum, stiff-faced, middle-aged man. "They weren't much alike then, except for that Hun arrogance." He laid the bald dead Nicholson beside the young Von König and moved his great head as he measured one against the other.

"The hands," he remarked thoughtfully, "they're a bit pudgy here, but they could be Von König's hands."

He gave a regretful glance at his picture and leaned back in his chair, his eyes staring at the ceiling.

Grainger stood quietly beside him—he recognised that the old man was searching his memory.

"Young Von König did get up to Oxford in the end," he said at last. "Try St. Luke's College, think that was the one."

Chapter Eighteen

Whether in high summer when the flat-bottomed punts glide on the green waters of the Cherwell, or in the grey misty winter when the medieval stones of Oxford claim their own, every graduate who crosses Magdalen Bridge and sees beyond Magdalen Tower the gentle curve of the High, feels in that moment that he has come home. If school is a man's Alma Mater, then Oxford is his mistress, Paul Grainger thought; and what a mistress! Ageless and unfading, all things to all men, sublimely independent yet always intimately welcoming.

He leaned back in his seat smoking contentedly as the police car turned out of the High into Longwall, skirted the emperors' heads that guard the domed Sheldonian and finally parked a stone's-throw from Blackwells in the Broad.

At the porter's lodge of St. Luke's College, he and Mac parted company. The sergeant's commission was to dig back through the years to the scout who had once looked after the young Von König, and who in all probability could tell them more about that unhappy and arrogant young man than anyone else in Oxford.

Grainger meanwhile turned up the shallow stone steps of the gently curving stairway that led from an archway in the squad to the senior tutor's rooms above it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mac watched the quiet figure with its scholar's stoop disappearing up the stairs.

"Oxford man himself, isn't he?" the porter said, following the sergeant's glance.

"Aye. Fits this place like the paper on the wall, does he no'? Not that you keep paper on the wall up here," Mac added doubtfully, eyeing the crumbling stonework without enthusiasm.

Grainger smiled reminiscently at the pellucid articulation of the voice that bade him enter, and walked into another book-lined room. No downs this time, but the monastic serenity and cherished green velvet of a quad below, and beyond, the spires and smoke of Oxford, town and gown. Across the city the church clocks began striking ten.

"Yes, we should be able to help you I think; what's the fellow's name?" the senior tutor asked when Grainger had explained what he wanted. "You don't know what his subject was, I suppose?" he added.

"Probably Law; though he may possibly have taken to that later. His name was Von König."

"Von König! You haven't a photo of him there, have you? I was tutor to a Von König about a quarter of a century ago."

He stared intently at the hospital group that Grainger laid before him.

"Can't pick him out here. Which one's your man?" The detective laid a forefinger on Everard Nicholson; the don shook his head. "I wouldn't like to say it wasn't, but it didn't ring a bell when you showed it to me. This chap's middle-aged though, it's a long gap. You haven't a younger one have you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I borrowed one from his school . . . if it is in fact the same man," and he laid the yellowed school-print on the tutor's desk.

"That's the fellow. I've often wondered what happened to him . . . somebody told me he'd joined up in 'thirty-nine or 'forty and I imagined he must have been killed." He frowned down at the photograph. "As you probably know," he went on after a shrewd glance at Grainger, "brilliant isn't a word we throw around up here. But it applied to

Von König. Not a popular fellow, but a pleasure to teach. And a worker, too. I expected to hear of him again."

"Hmm, that fits in as far as it goes. What I'd like to ask is, who told you he'd joined up? But that's a tall order after all this time, I expect."

The tutor laughed. "Well, yes, it is rather." He regarded the Superintendent speculatively. "What was your subject, if I may ask?"

"Greats."

The University man's eyebrows rose. "Hm, we always did say it was a good practical training, but the other side won't listen to us. Well, about Von König, it would probably have been somebody who was up with him . . . wait a moment."

The tutor returned with a large tome and began turning over the leaves.

"Here we are . . . Jenkinson, H. H. Smith, J. R. Roberts, Roberts, Roberts . . . no I don't think it was Roberts. . . . McCloud, Braithewaite, Derek Greene, Robert Hamilton. . . . I'm not sure that doesn't ring a bell. . . ."

"You did say Robert Hamilton?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me what he was reading?"

"Yes—er—just a minute . . . he wasn't one of mine . . . here he is, Medicine."

"Good Heavens!" Grainger sat back in his chair, his gaze focused in space; his hands sought in his pockets for his pipe and began to light it. Isolated facts were separating off from the body of information he had gathered for the case and arranging themselves in a new pattern. Robert Hamilton, Von König's age and a doctor . . . the man who looked as if he had seen a ghost when he caught sight of Nicholson without his toupée, who'd known where to look for a scar on the bald head . . . that dim photograph on the pathologist's desk . . . a Commemoration ball long ago in his own Oxford days. . . .

He put his hand in his breast pocket and brought out the faded little photo they had found in Nicholson's safe, the strangely haunting photograph of a beautiful girl dressed in the clothes of twenty years ago.

"That doesn't by any chance convey anything to you, does it?"

On the tutor's face looking down at the little print Grainger saw the shock of recognition. After a minute the university man said unbelievingly:

"She comes into this?"

"I think so, yes."

The other man frowned; he had picked up a pencil and was tracing careful patterns on his blotter.

"I can't tell you very much," he said at last. "But you're welcome to what I know. I hope—very earnestly—that it may not prove necessary to reopen this with her parents?"

"You know her parents?"

"They are very close friends of mine." He looked at Grainger as he added, "They have more to forget than most of us . . . two boys in the R.A.F., shot down one after the other in the same year . . . and two years later, 1945 it was, they . . . lost Alison. You're not a free agent, I know, but if it is possible to pursue your inquiries without reference to them . . ."

"I'll do so, of course. If you can give me a little to go on our people can dig up the rest. I'm glad to have been warned."

"And I'm very grateful to you on their behalf." The tutor picked up the faded little print and held it gently in him palm.

"Alison's maiden name was Brooke; her father is the master of Essex college. . . ."

"Yes," Grainger murmured as though to himself. The don looked at him in surprise. "You knew that?"

"I remembered it ten minutes ago . . . I was at Essex. I saw Alison Brooke once a very long time ago, at a Commemoration ball. That photograph has teased me throughout this case . . . it's a haunting face, I thought it was just that, until I remembered where I'd seen her."

"People always did remember Alison," the don said. He was silent for a few moments. "She was quite a byword up here," he went on. "It wasn't just her looks . . . she had an attractive personality . . . and tremendous vitality. She had flocks of admirers, of course. Robert Hamilton was one of these; he was a nice boy, a tall, quiet Scot, the deep kind and very determined. They fell in love in that overwhelming fashion that young people sometimes do . . . I think the psychologists call it a *folie-à-deux*. . . . Whatever it was they were superbly happy, it was a pleasure to see them together. Except for the young men who hadn't been so lucky, of course; I rather think Von König was one of these, if that helps you at all."

"It does."

"Well, she and Robert were married as soon as he was qualified and Alison went down to London to live near the hospital, he was only a house-surgeon, of course, and couldn't live out. I saw them up here on holiday once during that time . . . they were still on top of the world.

"Then the war broke out and Robert joined up and was posted overseas almost at once. Alison stayed on in London doing Civil Defence work. I didn't see her again until nearly four years later, when I found myself in London on leave and looked her up. I was shocked at the change in her, although I knew her mother was worried at the way she'd taken the separation from Robert. He was all over the room, his photo, his letters, his pipe, his slippers . . . except that he was somewhere in Burma, she didn't even know where. . . . She'd a big map pinned up on the wall, I remember, and when she wasn't talking, she'd keep looking at it. . . . She was cheerful enough superficially, but that radiance she'd had was completely gone . . . and she was shockingly thin. She made me think of an animal that finds itself in a trap and knows there's nothing left but the waiting and the end.

"Less than a month after that I heard that she was dead."

Grainger stared absently at his cold pipe. The other man was expecting the query in his eyes when he looked up.

"I never asked how it happened," he answered.

Mac had done well; he'd traced Von König as far as 1945. At that time he'd been a colonel in the 14th Army, the C.O. of a camp in Burma. There had been no more news of him after that and no one was willing to identify him unequivocally with the Everard Nicholson of the hospital photographs.

"We've enough on him now to persuade the War Office to disgorge for us," Grainger said as the police car raced back towards London. "Get what you can out of them this afternoon, will you, Mac. I'm going straight to the hospital. I must see Hamilton."

Chapter Nineteen

Grainger ran into the dean as he was crossing the courtyard of St. Justin's.

"Hullo, you're just in time for lunch. Come and join us in the refectory," Fothergill called to him. Grainger glanced at his watch. "All right, thank you," he agreed, and followed the other man into the big, noisy room.

"You can sit at our board and covertly examine us," Fothergill continued cheerfully as they sat down at one of the larger tables. "Who knows, you might even see the mark of Cain!"

The dean's voice, while not on a par with Peter Lamb's, had carrying qualities of its own. From tables all around, heads jerked up to stare at the detective. Grainger's dispassionate gaze wandered thoughtfully round the hostile faces turned his way.

"A pretty crude sort of thing to diagnose, I should have thought," Sir Charles remarked patronisingly.

Grainger glanced at him. "Compared with the sort of thing that taxes your experience, Sir Charles, I suppose it must seem so," he answered mildly. "But I should be interested in your approach to my problem. Tell me, what would you look for?"

If the surgeon was taken aback by this challenge, he certainly didn't show it. He raised his large head and stared thoughtfully into space.

"I'd look for the fellow who was scared," he announced portentously. He raised his eyebrows and looked around like an eagle surveying a valley for promising prey.

"Him, for instance," and his beautifully kept surgeon's hand suddenly shot forward, the index finger levelled at Alfred Jonson, who was quietly lunching at the next table. The little anaesthetist looked up, startled and alarmed, but the chorus of disapprobation from Sir Charles's own table saved him from the necessity to reply.

Hallet, however, was quite unabashed. "Or that one!" he went on, fixing someone beyond the table with his merciless blue glare; involuntarily every head turned to stare at poor Chris Harcourt. The young man stood there helplessly, like a rabbit under the gaze of a snake. As they watched, his grey face began to twitch and suddenly he turned and made off, his lame leg dragging behind him. Grainger noticed that young Geoffrey Tremaine abruptly left his table and followed his friend out of the canteen.

Sir Charles appeared to be enjoying himself. "Come to think of it," he went on, "I'd lend some passing attention to the deep ones. You, for instance," he remarked, staring dispassionately at Hamilton. "Nobody ever knows what you're thinking, eh, Robert? If I were our policeman friend, I'd find myself very suspicious of you!"

"Would you?" queried Hamilton with mild curiosity. "Hmm." And he returned to his conversation with Alan Rogers.

"But, of course, women are the traditional poisoners, aren't they?" Sir Charles continued in the strident voice so familiar to all his colleagues; he craned his neck to peer at the surrounding tables, and Grainger noticed that Susan Faraday abruptly lowered her head and busied herself with her eating. "Which of you fair ladies could wear the mark of Cain, eh?"

But Fothergill seemed to think Sir Charles had gone far enough, and raising his voice, he broke in:

"Perhaps you gentlemen will be interested in my theory; I think that all the staff of St. Justin's combined to rid itself and the Health Service of an intolerable incubus, and therefore, my dear Paul," he finished turning to Grainger, "you haven't a hope of pinning it on any of us!"

"How soon can I have an opportunity of speaking to you alone?" Grainger asked the pathologist before they left the table.

Hamilton's head came up quickly; the frosty eyes were as grey as granite now, but he said casually enough:

"I could be in my lab. in ten minutes' time—will that do? I'll see that no one disturbs us there."

"That will do admirably, Dr. Hamilton," Grainger replied, and he left the table suddenly and walked after Sir Charles who had nearly reached the door of the canteen.

The surgeon was patently displeased at being followed, but Grainger only walked faster until he was near enough to speak.

"To bait a murderer is a dangerous pastime, Sir Charles; in the circumstances it's my duty to warn you to take especial care. Unless, of course," the detective added, staring speculatively at the heavy, arrogant head, "you have the best of all reasons for feeling safe."

Sir Charles treated him to a hard, rude stare and stumped away down the corridor. Grainger watched him go; he was frowning slightly and his tall figure looked momentarily irresolute as he stood there, watching the thick-set surgeon out of sight. But after a moment he glanced at his watch and began making his way to the laboratory where he had arranged to meet Hamilton.

The pathologist was waiting for him; he uncoiled his long body from the chair by his mike and leisurely crossed the room to lock the door. Grainger walked deliberately over to the other man's desk to examine the faded photograph that was framed upon it.

"Any other personal effects I can interest you in?" Hamilton inquired of the detective in a flinty tone.

"No, Dr. Hamilton," there was a faint note of apology in Grainger's voice, "I'm afraid this is the relevant one."

Not a muscle moved in the doctor's long, stony face; for a few seconds he was absolutely still, then, rather stiffly, he sat down and began to fill his pipe.

Grainger looked at him.

"You knew Nicholson, both before and during the war, Dr. Hamilton. Why did you not tell me that?"

The pathologist struck a match and applied it to his pipe; he inhaled slowly and deliberately before replying:

"I did not know Nicholson, either before or during the war."

Grainger stared at him inimically. "Very well, doctor, we will call him Von König, shall we?"

Hamilton shrugged. "You can call him what you will."

"Do you deny that you were at St. Luke's College with a man named Von König? I may say that I was speaking with the senior tutor there this morning."

"I may have been. One doesn't remember everyone who happened to be in one's college."

Grainger sucked at his own pipe; taking the stem from his lips he asked:

"May I ask what was your wife's maiden name, Dr. Hamilton?"

"You may not."

"Very well, I will ask you something else. Why were you so startled when you saw Nicholson on the operating-table; that is, when you saw him without the toupée, spectacles and teeth he usually wore?"

"I was not startled; or no more so than the rest of us."

"I'm afraid that won't stick, Dr. Hamilton. According to an eye-witness you started as though you had seen a ghost."

"Your witness must have been exaggerating."

"Then how was it, doctor, that you were able, while still some distance from the body, to discern a scar, a very old and faded scar on Nicholson's bald head?"

Hamilton shrugged again. "Perhaps my work accustoms me to subtleties in visual appearances," he suggested plausibly.

"At close range, yes."

"I have very good sight."

The telephone suddenly shrilled at Hamilton's elbow, startling both men. The pathologist picked the receiver up.

"The Superintendent . . . yes, he's here. I'll put you over."

Grainger took the receiver from him.

"Who? . . . Sir Charles!" His face changed. "Just tell me again where you are, will you . . . yes . . . yes. No. Hold everything, I'll be right over."

The detective was already on his way to the door when Hamilton asked:

"Has something happened to Sir Charles?"

Grainger's look presaged no good for the pathologist.

"Were you perhaps expecting something to happen to Sir Charles?" he inquired. With his hand on the door-handle he added, "By this evening I shall have a full report of Von König's military career; your stonewalling won't help you much then, will it, Dr. Hamilton?"

Tremaine let the detective into the little office by the theatre block; the horror of what lay inside was written on the young man's face, and Grainger steeled himself for what must greet him. But neither experience nor foreknowledge could paint out what now lay before him.

Even the final agony of his death hadn't taken from Sir Charles all the curious greatness he'd possessed; perhaps it was that which gave to the piteous indignity of the cumbrous body arched on the floor, a quite intolerable poignancy. Even the face, Grainger thought, contorted as it was by the tearing pain of that last screaming grin, still bore witness to the pride and power of the dead surgeon.

He knelt by the body and Tremaine saw that he was trying to work loose the sheet of paper crushed in the surgeon's left hand. The remains of a fountain-pen protruded from the right fist. It had been crushed with such violence that ink and gold and plastic were scattered over the room and on the dead body.

It was scarcely a hand any more, Tremaine thought dully, staring at the tight ball of torn muscle contorting the bone beneath, and in his mind's eye he saw again the beautiful virtuosity of those exploring fingers, the gloved hand that seemed to think before the next incision. He knew that his grief was rather for the surgeon than for the man, but it remained grief, and he paid the man the last homage, as he looked at that agonised body, of pushing away the pity that Sir Charles would so proudly have rejected.

Grainger was crouched on the floor peering at the partially freed note; he called the young man over.

"You can't decipher that, can you?"

He must have written it as the strychnine began to take effect, Tremaine realised as he pored over the wild scrawl; he'd been too dumbfounded to grasp the significance of the fiercely clutched pen and paper before. But it was impossible to read words into that desperately penned message. He shook his head.

Grainger nodded and climbed grimly to his feet. With his hand on the telephone he asked suddenly:

"Harcourt went out during lunch; you followed him—where did he go?"

Tremaine stared at the detective. . . . "I don't know," he said at last. "He—he didn't want me, so I went away."

It was growing dark in the laboratory; Susan Faraday knocked lightly, glanced in and was going away again when her eyes picked out the long, lean figure hunched in the chair by the microscope. Startled and uncertain, she slowly advanced; Hamilton was sitting there staring out of the window into the darkening sky beyond the lighted ward-blocks; she noticed that he had a small, framed photograph in one hand.

Seeing her there suddenly, he started, and the photo slipped from his hand; Susan bent down at once to pick it up for him.

"I'm so sorry . . . I didn't mean to disturb you," she said rather breathlessly. "I—they are making tea outside, I looked in to see if you'd like some."

"Yes, thank you. . . ." Hamilton's voice was so toneless it sounded almost drugged. "I'd like some."

"Oh good. . . ." Susan's voice was strained and bright. "I'll—I'll bring you some then."

She came cautiously back into the darkness, carrying her tray, and peered about her in the gloom for space to put it down. Hamilton's long arm reached out and switched on the microscope light, and from its three shaded sides eerie blue rays escaped into the room.

Studiously not looking at her chief, Susan poured out. Hamilton replaced the photograph on his desk, picked up his cup and began to stir it.

"She's lovely, isn't she?" Susan's voice came suddenly out of the darkness. "I've often looked at her."

There was a moment's silence.

Then the voice with the Edinburgh accent answered: "Yes, she was lovely."

Susan said, "When did she die?"

After a long pause Hamilton answered:

"Sixteen years ago today."

"The year we beat the Germans," Susan said, as though she were working something out for herself.

"Yes. But we were still fighting the Japs."

Susan stirred. "You were in Burma, weren't you?"

"Yes." Suddenly he said in a startlingly different voice, "My wife thought I was killed there. Someone wrote to her and told her that. He described to her in pulsating detail just how I'd been tortured to death by the Japs."

Susan was silenced; after a long time, her horror still in her voice, she asked:

"But why?"

"Because he loved her and couldn't have her. So he destroyed her instead. She killed herself."

After a long silence he added, "I'm sorry. . . . I seem to be rather carried away tonight. I—I didn't mean to visit it on you . . . as a matter of fact you're the first person I've told for fourteen years or more. And you've troubles enough of your own without listening to mine. . . ."

There was a pause before Susan said:

"If you mean that I too have lost my husband . . . yes . . . I have."

Preoccupied as he was, something in her voice made Hamilton turn to look at her, but her head was bent, so that all he could see were the soft waves of her light-brown hair glinting in the rays of the lamp. Now that his attention was on her he was surprised to see how . . . appealing she looked; was all that spiky stiffness nothing more than shyness, he wondered. . . .

Suddenly she raised her eyes and he was so startled at the warmth that shone from them that he could only gaze at her in astonishment. Susan bent her head again hastily as she said:

"I don't know whether it's likely to be any comfort to you, but . . . losing someone you obviously loved . . . it does leave you your memories, doesn't it? If you lose someone for whom you have no respect . . . whom it was difficult not to despise . . . you haven't even those."

Before Hamilton could answer, there was a sharp rap at the door.

Susan jumped to her feet and put on the light. She glanced at the pathologist for permission to open it. A large, bare-headed policeman stood outside.

"Beg pardon for disturbing you, sir, but Superintendent Grainger, 'e asked me to say, 'e don't want no one to go 'ome tonight without they sees 'im first."

It seemed that the silence lasted a very long time, but in fact only a few seconds elapsed before Robert Hamilton answered:

"Thank you, officer. Dr. Faraday and I will remember that."

And when he had gone, they stared at each other with fear and each recognised that now they were strangers, not only to each other, but to themselves as well, for murder makes strangers of us all.

Chapter Twenty

That evening when Night Sister's message reached him and he learned what had been the basis for Charlotte Hallet's nightmare, Grainger realised that the end must come soon.

They went over it together in Sister's little office, the door locked against intruders.

"And no one knows except you and I?" Grainger reiterated.

"No one."

Under his still, spectacled face Grainger's mind had moved into high gear. 'So it's to be tonight,' he thought. . . . 'How much risk am I justified in taking?' His mind raced on, imagining ahead, checking as it went, tailoring his plan. . . .

"I shall have to see the room," he announced suddenly. "But it would be best if she doesn't realise who I am . . . she hasn't heard about her father?"

"No."

"Is the child very sick?"

"She has been, but she's making good progress now. . . ."

"She hasn't a weak heart?"

Sister shook her head. "No, it's her lungs, poor child, not her heart. But she's had an A.P.—an artificial collapse of one lung, and she's responding well."

"Good." Grainger stared into space for a few moments.

"I'll just glance round the room," he said then. "Can you introduce me as a friend of her father's?"

Charlotte looked self-contained for a seven-year-old, Grainger thought; she lay back against her pillows, reading, one thin arm round the shoulders of an enormous doll whose plump pink cheeks and ebullient flaxen hair seemed to emphasise the child's fragility.

"How d'you do, Charlotte," he said. "Daddy's very busy tonight, so he asked me to pop in and say Hallo."

"Oh. How do you do," the child returned politely.

"What a lovely doll you have there," the detective continued, smiling, while he rapidly took in the features of the little room.

"Yes, she's beautiful," the little girl said. "And she walks and talks too, and all her clothes come off. I'm going to put on her nightdress soon."

"Dr. Rogers brought her today," Sister said, smiling, "and her name is Lucy."

"What a pity Charlotte and Lucy can't see out of the window from their bed," Grainger remarked. "You can see the lights sparkling all over London from here. Look, Sister." And the detective gave her a significant glance.

"Yes"—Sister manfully picked up her cue—"we might be able to move the bed, perhaps, though we shall have to keep it out of draughts, of course."

Grainger noticed the child's gaze fastened anxiously upon him as he turned to go; he hesitated, smiling, but she didn't speak; instead, she looked down at the doll and then beseechingly up at the nurse.

Night Sister smiled understandingly, but there was embarrassment on the plump, firm face as she explained to him:

"Sir Charles hasn't yet met Lucy. I think Charlotte is hoping that you won't mention her until he's been introduced too."

Outside she explained, "Sir Charles didn't approve of dolls. It's been worrying the child all the afternoon."

She sent a nurse in to Charlotte to prepare the child for the night and returning to her office with the detective, listened attentively to what he wanted her to do.

When he had briefed her, Grainger rang Mac. They discussed the arrangements for the coming night in detail.

"Aboot Sir Charles, by the way," Mac added when every foreseeable eventuality had been provided for, "he was a diabetic, had to inject himself with insulin twice a day. Only today someone had thrown out the insulin and filled up his bottle with strychnine . . . 'twas child's play for the killer, the bottle was in an unlocked cupboard in Sir Charles's office."

"So he injected it into himself, poor devil, did he? I couldn't work out how they'd got the stuff inside him. . . . I'd warned him you know, less than half an hour before. . . ."

Mac, at the other end of the line, heard his chief sigh. Then the tired voice added:

"Not much longer now, I think, Mac. Be at the ready, won't you?"

Charlotte had been asleep; Sister had given her one of those special tablets that made sleep come over her in a great soft wave to carry her away without any thinking. But now she was waking, drifting up to the surface with a funny feeling inside her. The red night-light had gone . . . wasn't she in hospital any more then? . . . No, there it was, over there, it was the bed which was wrong. . . . 'Oh . . . Lucy! . . . To think I've only just remembered you. . . .' And, hugging the doll in the faint red light, Charlotte forgot what she had scarcely yet recognised as fear and drifted off to sleep again.

But the figure lurking in the shadows by the door didn't dare to move yet. It seemed an eternity before the shallow breaths grew slower, deeper, till safety beckoned him on to his dreadful task. . . .

He crept like a shadow along the wall, the hand that held the syringe hidden in his jacket, shaken by every piston-beat of his bursting heart.

He had reached the bed. As though she knew what threatened but couldn't waken, the child whimpered in her sleep and clutched the doll to her thin chest. One arm was flung across the pillows, half-hiding her face.

Infinitely slowly, the shadowy figure sank on to its knees; the loaded syringe glinted in the dull red light, the killer's left hand moved forward towards the bare arm that lay on the pillows. . . .

But even before Grainger's iron grip had reached out from behind the curtains to close upon him, the pale set face of the killer contracted . . . a strangled voice groaned thinly:

"Oh God, I can't. . . . I can't do it!"

Grainger stifled the ghastly sobbing with a fierce hand and dragged the unresisting body of the murderer from the child's room.

White-faced outside the door, Night Sister was waiting for him. Gesturing to her to go in to the child, he half-carried his sobbing burden down the corridor to her office, where MacGregor awaited him. The Scot stared woodenly at the syringe he had taken from the little fat man; his eyes met Grainger's and his chief nodded.

"I know," he said, and they both looked down at the red needle prick on the plump white wrist that lay, quite flaccid now, on the little man's thigh.

"You'd better get help," Grainger remarked to his sergeant, and added deliberately, "I think it'll take you some time."

MacGregor nodded and disappeared.

"I wouldn't have done it," Jonson whispered. "Even if you hadn't stopped me . . . I couldn't do it!"

"But you killed the others. . . ."

"Yes . . . I killed the others. But not the child. . . . I killed them for my little David's sake . . . but I couldn't kill the child!"

"You hid in her room the night you killed Nicholson . . ."

"Someone was coming, I had to hide. . . . I didn't think she'd seen me . . . today I told myself I'd just make sure. . . . I opened her door; I could feel her staring at me all the while I was talking to her and then just as I was going she said, 'It wasn't a nightmare, was it? It was you.'" His face seemed suddenly to split up. . . . "I couldn't kill her, I couldn't," he moaned. "I didn't want to kill anybody, but they would have destroyed me. . . ." His voice was rising now. "I only wanted to be left alone with Alice and my little David . . . only they wouldn't let me alone . . . they'd have shut me up again. . . . I had to kill them!" The voice had become a blurred scream.

Grainger frowned uneasily as he pursued: "But why did you kill Sir Charles?"

"He knew. . . . *HE KNEW!*" Jonson was sobbing again, "I didn't want to kill him, but he knew!"

"What did he know?"

"He knew I'd killed Nicholson . . . if only he hadn't known. . . . I didn't want to kill him . . . I didn't want to. But I had to. It wasn't any good killing Nicholson if he knew I'd done it." He was sobbing more quietly now and his head was hanging unevenly on his shoulders. Grainger wondered how much longer he had to live.

When he spoke again, it was only a blurred mumbling and Grainger sat with sober face, head bent, straining to piece the broken words together.

"They"—he spoke the word as though it were in capitals —"*they* had me shut up before . . . it was because I knew too much about *them* . . . destroyers, they are . . . Nicholson was a destroyer, that's why I had to kill him."

For a few minutes there was silence in the little room, then behind the magnifying circles of glass, Grainger saw the dying man's lids lift and the doped eyes stared at him with distressful earnestness. . . .

"You must never talk about *them*," the ghostly voice warned him, "they're too cunning to allow that . . . they'll whisper about you, 'he's mad', they'll say, 'irresponsible' . . . '*Lock him up!*' . . . And then when they've won, they'll laugh and gibber at you through the windows and out of the dark . . . 'You thought you could show us up, did you?' they'll say . . . 'but your friends wouldn't listen to you, would they? They won't trust you, not ever again . . . we got inside their minds . . . we told them you were *mad*. . . .'

"But it wasn't true . . . the sick always trusted me . . . twenty years . . . giving anaesthetics . . . never lost a patient. . . ." The slurred voice was growing weaker. "My wife . . . loves me . . . and David . . . little David. . . ."

The dying man's head was lolling on his shoulder; frowning uneasily, Grainger supported it for him.

"Is there any message you want me to give them?" he asked, half-shouting to catch the man's last lucid moments.

"Yes . . . yes." With a supreme effort Jonson opened his eyes and stared into the detective's face. . . .

"Tell my wife . . . money in my desk . . . and air-line tickets . . . Canada. She won't ask questions . . . that's why I loved her. . . . David mustn't know what his father was . . . all for his sake, tell her that."

Mac had come in with Tremaine and a nurse; Grainger looked up and gave a faint nod; he gently moved Jonson's head so that it lay on the back of his chair and thoughtfully straightened the dead man's spectacles, for they were hanging awry.

Through the window the first light of a new day was breaking in the sky. Somewhere, in a back yard, a cock crowed in greeting.

Chapter Twenty-One

Geoff and Anne Tremaine were talking so eagerly in the doorway of the Coroner's court that they didn't realise at once that no one could get past them.

"So sorry," the young doctor apologised, and added in surprise, "Why, it's you!" He turned back to his wife, "Darling, we must get a move on, we've been obstructing the law in pursuance of its duty! . . . Let me introduce Superintendent Grainger and Sergeant MacGregor, who've just finished untangling our rather horrific mystery at St. Justin's."

Anne smiled and held out her hand.

"I've had three dead bodies in a week," Geoff complained, "and I haven't even understood what it's all about."

"No, it seems to have been most involved and mysterious," Anne said. She grinned up at the two detectives, "I suppose in real life you never sit back in an armchair, absently swirling the brandy in your glass while you elucidate the mystery for people like us who are still in the dark?"

"Well . . ."

"Reckon 'tis a pity we don't," ruminated the sergeant. "Think I'd rather it was Scotch, though."

"I suppose beer wouldn't serve," remarked Geoff. "I've got lots of beer in the car. We meant to have a house-warming tonight. Anne moved into our flat yesterday and this is my first night off since I started at St. Justin's. But with people getting murdered all round us, a party seemed a bit inappropriate."

"Won't you come and help us drink it up?" Anne suggested. "The flat's just round the corner from here." She smiled engagingly at the two detectives. "We'll be awfully good and not ask you anything about the murders if you'd rather we didn't. Are you off duty like us, or does the next case claim you as soon as one is finished?"

"Well, it tends to, I suppose; but we've finished for tonight, thank goodness. It's been quite a week."

"You can say that again," Geoff reciprocated. "It seems more like a year since I started at St. Justin's! But seriously, sir, Anne and I would be delighted if you'd both come in and baptise the flat for us. How about it?"

Grainger exchanged a quick glance with his sergeant. "Why, yes, if you really want to inundate your flat with large detectives drinking beer. . . ."

"Oh, but we do," Anne interrupted cheerfully. "Our best man was a detective."

"Well, then, we'd love to. We'll see if we can't do our part and sum up the case for you, like those chaps in the books!"

JYL and the police car drew up behind the bright new Hillman Minx that had seemed so alluring to Peter Lamb, and Geoff began unloading beer bottles.

"Actually," he remarked confidentially to the detective, "I haven't seen the flat yet. . . . Anne tells me it's a bit startling at first . . . thought I'd just warn you."

The Honeywells appeared in force to welcome the couple, but faded away with obtrusive tact on observing that their tenants had arrived with 'company', and the four of them pressed on up to the top of the house.

There, gazing with enigmatic unconcern above their heads, they found a giant Buddha peacefully contemplating eternity from his cramped vantage point on the attic landing.

"Ah . . . I see you've brought your Household Gods with you," Grainger remarked, picking his way past the monster.

"I'm so glad you noticed him, Superintendent," Anne answered grinning. "It's entirely thanks to him that we've somewhere to lay our heads! The last tenants left him here," she went on as they all trouped inside, "along with a lot of smaller fry, as you can see, and poor Mr. Honeywell rather shrank from offering a flat that was already populated with Heathen Deities! But I managed to persuade him that there was plenty of room for all of us."

When they'd rounded up enough objects to sit down on and broached the beer, Grainger rubbed his chin and smiled thoughtfully at the young couple.

"So you'd like to know why you were so troubled with murdered men during your first week at St. Justin's, would you?"

"Well, yes, sir," Geoff answered at once, "if you really don't mind telling us. I'll confess I'd love to know what it was all about. Of course, I heard the bare facts just now at the inquest. . . . I gather it was Alfred Jonson who killed both Everard Nicholson and Sir Charles, and then finished it off by killing himself. But why did he do it? And why were a good few others so obviously on tenterhooks all last week?"

"Hmm, that's enough to go on with." Grainger emptied his glass and placed it thoughtfully on a black wooden elephant that was doing duty as an occasional table.

"As to the last point," he went on, "since they're going to be your colleagues, I expect you'd rather I didn't go into personalities too much . . . an outline of how and why it all happened is really what you want, isn't it?" And the Superintendent lighted his pipe and glanced with momentary amusement at his sergeant, who was reclining complacently on a battered model's throne and enjoying a pint of bitter.

"Well, as a matter of fact, this shouldn't have been a murder case at all. It ought to have been a simple case of embezzlement; though, come to think of it, 'simple' is perhaps rather an inappropriate word for anything connected with Everard Nicholson. He was in fact a very skilful embezzler indeed and must have been at the game for a long time. As Mac will tell you, he had a safe stuffed with banknotes and valuable gems. He must have been quite a romantic in his way; they were all, rather unnecessarily I thought, packed away in oriental boxes with trick locks.

"I doubt if anyone seriously suspected what he was up to, except Sir Charles, whose flair for accurate diagnosis extended beyond his surgery, incidentally. But Nicholson, who, we later discovered, had been in gaol in India for embezzlement during the war, didn't intend to be caught again, and he threw out a smoke-screen to protect himself from awkward inquiries. He deliberately set himself up as a dangerous customer, who was best left alone; not a difficult thing for him to do, for he was by nature a lonely, dislikable fellow, and with busy doctors who haven't much time or patience with administrators anyway, quite effective.

"But actually, it was just at this point that his own tastes began paving the way to his death. He got too interested in his smoke-screen, and not content with being unapproachable, he began to attack. For personal reasons which I won't go into now, he had a deeply rooted hatred for doctors, and he began to look for levers which would give him power over them. By the time we are middle-aged, I suppose most of us have incidents in our lives which we would prefer not to have advertised; Nicholson, or to use his real name, Von König—for he changed both his name and his appearance after escaping from gaol during the war—Von König was clever, persistent and merciless. His mental calibre was of a very high order, but from childhood he had been lonely, his hand against every man's, and now he became carried away with the sense of power and the emotional excitement of wielding it. It gained such a hold on him that his discretion began to slip—and the famous anonymous letters were the result.

"Even then he might have escaped death if he had been more careful in his choice of victims; for many of those he attacked with his poison pen reacted robustly; they were irritated and disgusted, but too busy to bother. But among your colleagues there were two whom I early realised were incapable of taking this attitude, however much they'd have liked to. Both of these men had achieved sufficient balance to cope with their professional and private lives; but neither of them had the natural stability to withstand a persistent, malicious attack. One of these was Jonson; I'll leave you to guess the other."

"Unfortunately, that's all too easy," Geoff said; he frowned. "Poor Chris . . . we trained together, you know. He—well he was a hell of a good chap. I don't mind telling you now, I got the devil of a shock when I met up with him again last week. That blighter Nicholson must have eaten his insides out for him like that beastly grub . . . what's it called? . . ."

"Ichneumon," supplied Grainger absently. "Yes, I'm afraid your friend has taken a severe shaking."

"D'you think he'll get over it, sir?" Geoff asked the detective suddenly.

Grainger lifted his chin and stared thoughtfully into space.

"Yes, with that young woman to help him, I think he will," he answered after a moment. "She loves him and she has the kind of courage the job's going to need."

"Mm. . . . I reckon that's right," Geoff said, and smiled across the room at his wife.

"What I haven't grasped," he went on a moment later, "is how they traced the anonymous letters back to Nicholson?"

"Through his typewriter—at Lamb's suggestion incidentally. From a detective point of view Lamb's diagnostic ability was as remarkable as Sir Charles's."

Grainger picked up his mug and drained the dark liquid from under the foam. "We found ourselves then, watching these two—less stable individuals, critically if sympathetically," he went on. "By now we had in our hands all the information on which the anonymous letters had been based.

Extensive inquiries had helped us very little in the matter of opportunity. No one had been seen entering Nicholson's room at or near the time when he was killed; moreover, practically everyone who might have wished him out of the way was within easy reach of the sick man that night.

"At this time I decided that, blatant and obvious though they were, the anonymous letters were not necessarily the clue to Nicholson's death, and diving into his past, we fished up Von König. Further inquiries at Oxford and later at the War Office, provided us with a new suspect.

"At St. Justin's now there is a man whose young wife was subjected sixteen years ago to a mental torture that ended in her death. At that time this doctor was a young M.O. and Von König, the Commanding Officer of his camp; they were both fighting in the Burma campaign. The two men had met before, at Oxford, where they both fell in love with the same girl. Von König, because he had loved her and she had married his rival, now took his revenge; he sent the M.O. into the jungle on a fictitious mission, and while he was out of the way, gloatingly described to the girl the tortures with which the Japs were supposed to have killed her husband. The young wife committed suicide.

"By the time the war was over and the M.O. had found his way back to civilisation, Von König had apparently vanished off the face of the earth, and it wasn't until sixteen years later when he came upon Nicholson unconscious, without the teeth, toupée and glasses which, with his overweight, had so disguised him, that recognition suddenly clamoured. White with shock, he bent forward, his eyes searching for the line of the scar he himself had stitched on Von König's scalp. As you know, he found it there.

"Well, there isn't much left that you don't already know; this story, though it had to be investigated, proved irrelevant. It was the unstable Jonson who had been goaded to action under the constant stimulus of fear; Sir Charles, who was afraid of nothing, unknowingly invited death when he pointed at Jonson, saying, 'Look for the fellow who's afraid!' I went after him and warned him, but I didn't know what Jonson knew, that within half an hour he was due to inject himself with insulin.

"Ironically enough, it was Sir Charles's daughter who caught him for us; she half-woke on the night of Von König's murder, when Jonson slid into her room. He was waiting until the corridor was clear. But it wasn't until, nervous for fear that she might have recognised him, he paid her a visit, that in fact she did so and challenged him; Night Sister heard her say, 'It wasn't a nightmare, was it, it was you?'"

"Poor child," said Anne compassionately. "Too late to save her father."

There was a moment's silence and then Geoff said hesitantly: "Sir Charles was a superb surgeon . . . but the child was rather frightened of him, I think . . ."

And Grainger nodded unconsciously; looking back into the case, he saw again the sick child with her doll, and her mother who had seemed so lost in the bleak drawing-room of that pretentious house; he remembered the letter, so troubled with guilt, but so full of love, with which Everard Nicholson had taunted Alan Rogers; and he found himself thinking that perhaps, after all, something more than sorrow and grief might follow this tangle of suspicion and bloodshed.

OLD STUDENTS NEVER DIE
Ivan T. Ross

Ben Gordon had to admit that his former pupil, Jackie Meadows, was a success as a night club entertainer; but as a weekend host he was a complete washout—for there was nothing funny about murder.

A TIME TO HATE
Seldon Truss

While in prison, Lucio Ferdinand swore to repay Colonel Pountney, the prison governor who had him flogged. The Colonel's sudden death made Lucio both a prime murder suspect and a central figure in a chain of events that threatened a woman's reputation and a girl's life.

CHAIN OF DEATH
Nancy McLarty

Colin McLeod, attractive newspaper reporter, planned her vacation in Guatemala purposely to avoid the tourist season. But her plans didn't include becoming the key link in an international conspiracy that threatened the peace of the Western Hemisphere.

SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE
Doris Miles Disney

Grace Munson was a widow. Paul Kendros was a widower. They met, and Paul became dangerously interested—not in her—but in what she knew.

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